

# THE QUAGMIRE MYTH AND THE STALEMATE MACHINE

DANIEL ELLSBERG

*In South Vietnam, the U.S. had stumbled into a bog. It  
would be mired down there a long time.*

Nikita Khrushchev to Ambassador Thompson,  
July 1962

By the middle of the First Indochina War, French journalists, contradicting the generals, were telling French readers of a bog in Indochina. Lucien Bodard's account of the 1946-1950 period — which looks quasi-prophetic today — was entitled "The Bogging Down," or in its American edition, *The Quicksand War*.<sup>1</sup> By the mid-1960s Americans had similar stories to tell. The parallel account was David Halberstam's *The Making of a Quagmire*,<sup>2</sup> published just as the real buildup of American ground forces and airpower was beginning.

"Many people thought the title was too harsh, more pessimistic than was warranted," Halberstam recalls. Within two years many of the same people had come to find that title just right. This included some former officials — Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for one, and later Richard Goodwin and Townsend Hoopes — who now saw the war, with its greatly increased human and material costs, reflecting good intentions but wrong premises and offering little promise of success.

For a great many, perhaps most Americans, images of "quag-

\* This article is part of a larger study of "mechanisms" and perceptions that have shaped American involvement in Indochina, now in progress at the Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. My particular debt to Leslie Gelb is acknowledged below (see footnote 26). I have also benefitted greatly by discussions with Morton Halperin and Richard Moorsteen.

An earlier and longer version of this paper, entitled "Escalating in a Quagmire," was delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Los Angeles, September 12, 1970. This abridgement does not fully reflect the many valuable comments elicited by a wide informal distribution of that version.

<sup>1</sup> Lucien Bodard, *The Quicksand War: Prelude to Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), which combines, somewhat abridged, translations of *L'Enlèvement* (Paris, 1963) and its sequel, *L'Humiliation* (Paris, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> David Halberstam, *The Making of a Quagmire* (New York: Random House, 1964).

mire . . . morass . . . quicksand . . . bog" dominate their perception of America's relation to the Second Indochina War. Along with the notion of "stumbling in," these metaphors convey a particular, widely-shared understanding of the process of decision-making that has yielded a steadily expanding American military involvement in Indochina.

It is a conception that Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., has made precise, as we shall see below. Its implications of lack of foresight, awareness, or calculation are not highly flattering to past responsible officials but are at least extenuating. They accord with the almost universal presumption that the outcome of the process — in Schlesinger's words, "that nightmare of American strategists, a land war in Asia" — *must* be "a war which no President . . . desired or intended," a war in which "we" — Presidents and all — "find ourselves entrapped."<sup>3</sup>

Yet the quagmire conception is, it will be argued here, a profoundly misleading one. The factual premises on which it is based, about what the President was told to expect from various courses, are mistaken. On more inferential matters, it suggests answers that are probably wrong to the questions: What did our Presidents think they were doing? What was aimed at, what hoped for? What was the causal role of inattention, bureaucratic conflict, and overoptimism? With respect to the future workings of the decision-making process, the "quagmire" notion is likely to yield poor predictions, and poor advice on how to bring about change.

For one critical decision period, at least — the fall of 1961 — information now publicly available is sufficient to test, and indeed to establish, these propositions. That is possible mainly because of the revelation by the "Kennedy historians" of much previously concealed data relating to the decisions. For few other periods are the public data comparably adequate. Thus, until more such materials are made public, readers who have not had official access to them can only regard most of the propositions presented here with respect to periods other than 1961 as hypotheses. As such, their implications, at least, can be analyzed; and they can be tested to some extent against the judgments of others who have had

<sup>3</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Bitter Heritage* (rev. ed.; New York: Fawcett World, 1968), p. 47.



relevant governmental experience, as well as against past and current events.<sup>4</sup>

Let us begin by examining the late-1961 decisions in detail, as a test of Schlesinger's "quagmire model," which is first defined. Then we shall turn to the origins in 1949-1950 of American military involvement in support of the French, for clues to an alternative understanding of presidential motives, perceptions, and choices. One hypothesis that seems to fit well many otherwise puzzling aspects of choices over the entire period from 1950 to 1968, and perhaps later, is presented in the form of a "stalemate machine": a set of decision rules that Presidents (four so far, going on five) have acted "as if" they obeyed. After exploring some of the patterns in policy and performance that emerge from applying such rules to the problems officials have perceived in Indochina, we will return to the "quagmire model" to consider why, flawed as it is empirically, it appears so plausible and appeals so strongly.

### *The Schlesinger "Quagmire Model"*

The precise implications of the "quagmire" notion for an understanding of the policy process have been spelled out by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in two much-quoted passages, the first referring to the increases in the level of military advisers in Vietnam under President Kennedy in November 1961:

This was the policy of 'one more step' — each new step always promising the success which the previous *last step* had also *promised* but had unaccountably failed to deliver. . . .<sup>5</sup>

And so the policy of 'one more step' lured the United States

<sup>4</sup> The assertions and speculations below on U.S. decision-making reflect the writer's experience as Special Assistant to the Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA), August 1964 to August 1965; member of General Lansdale's Senior Liaison Office in Vietnam, August 1965 to December 1966; Special Assistant to the Deputy Ambassador, Saigon, December 1966 to June 1967; and research since that time, in part as a consultant, with official access. All of these functions posed the responsibility and opportunity to learn data on earlier decision-making. Unsatisfactory as it is to present generalizations and assertions without specific citation, it seems less so than either to rely entirely on the public record or to pretend to do so, to forego generalizations or to subscribe to wrong ones.

<sup>5</sup> Schlesinger, *op. cit.*, p. 39; italics added.

deeper and deeper into the morass. In retrospect, Vietnam is a triumph of the politics of inadvertence. We have achieved our present entanglement, not after due and deliberate consideration, but through a series of small decisions. It is not only idle but unfair to seek out guilty men. President Eisenhower, after rejecting American military intervention in 1954, set in motion the policy of support for Saigon which resulted, two Presidents later, in American military intervention in 1965. Each step in the deepening of the American commitment was *reasonably regarded at the time as the last that would be necessary*. Yet, in retrospect, each step led only to the next, until we find ourselves entrapped in that nightmare of American strategists, a land war in Asia.<sup>6</sup>

With this dynamic "quagmire" model, "step by step, each one promising success," Schlesinger purports to explain the whole process that led from Eisenhower's support to Diem in 1954 to American military intervention in 1965. The model can as well be measured against the longer period from our first direct military grants to the French in 1950 under Truman — Schlesinger curiously neglects these Democratic roots — to the present. Many would find it equally persuasive, compellingly so, for the whole period.

It is an unusually satisfying abstraction. It is simple, even elegant. It sums up a long series of decisions coherently to explain a baffling outcome. It is unquestionably plausible: almost surely more so than any simple alternative drawing upon publicly available evidence. So many of the gross, observable features of our involvement are encompassed: the gradualness; the public, sometimes clearly genuine optimism; evidently surprising setbacks followed by new commitments. And it accords with the major, almost universal presumption that the "nightmare" outcome *must* have been as unforeseen even as a strong possibility by those who made the decisions leading toward it; or else they would have drawn back, or warned the public of the demands ahead.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47; italics added. It is only because this statement of a familiar point of view is so explicit, and because his own factual testimony is critical to refuting it, that Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., — who has elsewhere said many cogent and useful things about our Vietnam involvement — is so often cited in this paper in such a way as to appear inadvertently as a whipping boy.

As a generalized account of the important decisions, and the considerations that led to them, which increased American involvement in Indochina, this explanation is marred only by being totally wrong for each one of those decisions over the last twenty years.

This is not to deny that there were months and years in those two decades when ill-founded optimism — which was publicly asserted almost continuously by officials to the American people — actually ruled the minds of most insiders including the President. For example, this was true during most of 1962;<sup>7</sup> likewise, parts of 1953, 1957, and 1967. But none of these were years in which significant new U.S. commitments were determined or begun. Indeed, what needs explaining is not how optimism led regularly to decisions to escalate — there is no such pattern, nor even a major instance through 1968 — but how bureaucratic optimism developed after, and out of, decisions to expand the nature of U.S. involvement. The latter decisions, as revealed in internal documentation, reflected desperation more than hope.

The specific years in which these new involvements and new programs were chosen and begun were without exception periods of crisis and pessimism, generally far blacker than ever admitted to the public. Nor, in retrospect, do the dark assessments during these periods appear nearly so distorted or unfounded as do, now, the moods of optimism that regularly came later. In the actual years of decision, the gap between estimates and reality — covering both the current situation and the prospects of the option actually chosen — was relatively small, surprisingly and creditably so.

Not one of these decision points, in fact — 1950, 1954, 1955, 1961, 1963, 1965 (see the discussion below) — fits Schlesinger's generalization to the slightest degree. For not one of them, viewed from the inside, is that description anything but radically misleading.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Schlesinger's accurate description of the exuberant mood in that year, going into 1963: *op. cit.*, pp. 41, 42; and see the discussion below of the causal mechanisms by which optimism follows from escalation.

<sup>8</sup> The same is true of a more recent formulation by Schlesinger, which focuses specifically on military promises and responsibility. "At every stage of our descent into the quagmire, the military have played the dominant role. . . . At each point along the ghastly way, the generals promised that just one more step of military escalation would bring the victory so long sought and so steadily denied." See *Partisan Review*, XXXVII (No. 4, 1970), 517.



That is strikingly true of the very decision that Schlesinger characterizes as typifying the "policy of 'one more step'": John F. Kennedy's decision to break openly through the 1954 Geneva ceiling on U.S. military personnel in South Vietnam, starting the climb from under 1,000 to over 15,000 "advisors" and support personnel at the time of his death.

To be sure, newspaper accounts at the time of this episode of policymaking — whose public aspects began with Kennedy's sending General Maxwell Taylor and Walt W. Rostow on a mission to Saigon — fully support, in retrospect, the "quagmire" interpretation. But those accounts were mistaken, based partly on official lies. Ironically, it is Schlesinger's own account that reveals the facts that contradict both these earlier, "managed" inferences and his own generalization. Because the phenomenon of deception is part of what is to be explained, let us look first at the newspaper versions, then at Schlesinger's report.

#### *The November 1961 Decision*

The day that General Taylor and his mission left Washington for South Vietnam, the *New York Times* headlined a story by Lloyd Garrison: "Taylor Cautious on GI's for Asia"; "Departs for South Vietnam — Hints US Reluctance to Commit Troops."<sup>9</sup>

The story noted:

Last week President Kennedy announced that he was sending General Taylor and an eleven-man mission to South Vietnam to make 'an educated guess' about whether the United States would be required to send troops to stop Communist advances in Southeast Asia. . . .

Before he departed aboard a military jet airliner, General Taylor, who is the President's special military adviser, was asked to comment on reports that President Kennedy was becoming increasingly reluctant to commit United States forces to a fighting role in South Vietnam. . . .

General Taylor declined to speak for the President, but

<sup>9</sup> *New York Times* (October 16, 1961; story datelined October 15). All newspaper stories cited in this section are from the *New York Times*; dates are dates of publication of stories (generally datelined a day earlier). All italics added.

declared: "*Any American would be reluctant to use troops unless absolutely necessary.*"

His remarks appeared to reflect a tendency on the part of high Administration sources to pull back from earlier warnings of the possible use of United States troops in the fighting.

James Reston, in a column from Washington dated October 19, declared that reports aroused by the Taylor mission that "the United States is about to plunge into the guerrilla warfare of Southeast Asia . . . should be taken with considerable skepticism, at least for the time being."

General Taylor is not only a soldier but a philosopher with a soldier's respect for power and geography, and a philosopher's sense of perspective. Accordingly *he is not likely to favor plunging blithely into a jungle war 7,000 miles from home where the landscape and the logistics favor the enemy. . . .*

President Kennedy is not eager to add to his problems in Germany by mounting an adventure in Southeast Asia, and while additional troops may be sent there to help train and direct the defenders, *General Taylor has certainly not gone there to organize an invasion.*

Over the next week, speculation continued to focus on Taylor's conclusion as to whether or not U.S. combat troops would be needed in South Vietnam. Speaking at the airport as he left Saigon, Taylor agreed that this issue was "one of the principal things I have been asked to look at," but kept his opinions for the President.

"I am going back with my own impressions of what might be done. . . . Obviously I cannot discuss what these recommendations will be as they are primarily the property of my President and he will have to decide what to do about it," General Taylor declared.

"I have great confidence in the military capability of South Vietnam to cope with anything within its border," he went on, and to "defend the country against conventional attack."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *New York Times* (October 26, 1961).

On November 3, General Taylor returned to Washington, spoke to reporters at the airport, then saw President Kennedy for two hours at the White House. The lead story in the *New York Times* on November 4, by E. W. Kenworthy, reported:

On his return from a three-week mission to Southeast Asia, General Taylor said that President Ngo Dinh Diem had the 'assets' available to prevail against the Communist threat.

The General declined to comment directly on whether he would recommend sending United States combat troops to stiffen the Vietnamese forces in their fight against the Viet Cong (Communist) guerrillas.

However, when General Taylor was reminded at the airport that his remarks before leaving Saigon had been interpreted as meaning that President Ngo Dinh Diem's problem was not manpower, the general replied: 'That is correct. It is a populous country.'

Officials said it was correct to infer from this that *General Taylor did not look favorably on the sending of United States combat troops at this time.* . . .

Although some officials in the White House and the State and Defense Departments are known to favor the dispatch of American forces, there would be *considerable surprise here if General Taylor recommended such a move.*<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the President is known to be opposed to sending troops except as a last resort. . . .

*While opposing the sending of American combat forces, General Taylor is understood to favor the dispatch of necessary military technicians and to propose intensified training of South Vietnamese elite troops in anti-guerrilla warfare by United States Rangers.*

On November 16, Kenworthy reported:

President Kennedy has decided on the measures that the United States is prepared to take to strengthen South Vietnam against attack by Communists.

The measures, which received final approval yesterday at

<sup>11</sup> As we shall see, he had recommended it formally by cable two days earlier, to no one's very great surprise.



a meeting of the National Security Council, *closely follow the recommendations* made by General Maxwell D. Taylor, the President's military adviser. . . .

The United States' plans do not include the dispatching of combat units at this time. . . .

Officials emphasized that President Kennedy and the National Security Council had not foreclosed the possibility of sending ground and air combat units if the situation deteriorated drastically. The President, it was said, does not wish to bind himself to a "never-position."

However, *the President and General Taylor are agreed*, according to reliable informants here, that the South Vietnamese Government is capable of meeting and turning back the Communists' threat provided it speeds the training of its regular forces, solves the problem of mobility, develops a reliable intelligence system and adopts reforms in its military staff structure to free it from political interference.

From this series of articles, based on "reliable, official" sources, uncontradicted by any official, readers of the *New York Times* could only conclude that Taylor and Rostow, sent over to Vietnam to evaluate the need for combat units, had recommended against sending such forces and had assured the President that the programs he adopted, which did not include combat units and which allegedly encompassed their recommendations, were adequate to meet U.S. objectives.

This was the opposite of the truth.

What Taylor and Rostow actually recommended was exposed to the public by Arthur Schlesinger's own account, half a decade later:

The Taylor-Rostow report recommended an enlargement of the American role, essentially through the penetration of the South Vietnamese army and government by American "advisers," attached to Vietnamese military units of government offices and designed to improve the level of local performance. Taylor and Rostow *also* recommended that an American military task force — perhaps 10,000 men — go to Vietnam, commissioned to conduct combat operations for self-defense and perimeter security and, if the Vietnamese army were hard

pressed, to act as an emergency reserve. The report concluded by saying that *this* program would work *only* if infiltration from the north were stopped and that, therefore, should this infiltration continue, the United States should consider a contingency policy of retaliation against the north, graduated to match the intensity of Hanoi's aid to the Viet Cong.

*Kennedy rejected both the northern strategy and the use of combat soldiers. . . .* He increased the number of military advisers.<sup>12</sup>

Schlesinger does not seem to have noticed what damage this account does to his proposition just two sentences later concerning Kennedy's decision: "This was the policy of 'one more step' — each step always promising the success which the previous last step had also promised but had unaccountably failed to deliver."

He reports, after all, no promises whatever concerning the set of programs Kennedy actually adopted, which omitted both of the critical elements mentioned, "the northern strategy and the use of combat soldiers." And in fact, for what remained, no promises were made by Taylor and Rostow, or by anyone else.

The implications of this discrepancy are obscured by Schlesinger's rather offhand comment that Taylor and Rostow "also" recommended — or as he put it elsewhere, "even envisaged"<sup>13</sup> sending an American combat task force. Such phrases hint that this proposal was presented as merely one among many, perhaps as a tentative luxury that could be discarded without affecting essentially the prospects of an otherwise-adequate strategy.

The fact is that Taylor described the sending of U.S. ground combat units as *essential* if the U.S. were to reverse the current downward trend of events. He reported that he did not, in fact, believe that the program to save South Vietnam would succeed without it. As Theodore Sorensen reports, "Many believed that American troops were needed less for their numerical strength than for the morale and will they could provide to Diem's forces and for the warning they could provide to the Communists."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Schlesinger, *op. cit.*, p. 39; italics added.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965; page references here are to the paperback edition, New York: Fawcett World, 1967), p. 504.

<sup>14</sup> Theodore Sorensen, *Kennedy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 653.

But if these were, as Sorensen describes them, "speculative psychological reasons," Taylor and Rostow did not put them forward lightly. The immediate problem they found in Vietnam was "a double crisis of confidence: doubt that the United States was really determined to save Southeast Asia; doubt that Diem's methods could really defeat the Viet Cong."<sup>15</sup> No alternative action, Taylor maintained, could be so convincing of U.S. seriousness of purpose and hence so reassuring to the people and government of South Vietnam and to other allies as the introduction of U.S. forces. The Vietnamese and Southeast Asians would undoubtedly draw definitive conclusions, Taylor and Rostow believed, in the coming weeks and months concerning the probable outcome and would adjust their behavior accordingly. What the U.S. did or failed to do (i.e., in that period) would be decisive to the end result.

A force large enough to have the psychological effects required, Taylor suggested, must be more than a bare token, and must be capable of performing tasks of significant value, including (in Schlesinger's paraphrase), "conducting combat operations for self-defense and perimeter security and, if the Vietnamese Army were hard pressed, of providing an emergency reserve."<sup>16</sup>

Taylor underlined the urgency by making explicit his recognition of an impressive list of disadvantages of the proposed move. These included: an increased engagement of U.S. prestige; the difficulty of resisting pressure to reinforce the first contingent if it were not enough (there was no limit to the possible commitment, he warned, if we sought ultimately to clean up the insurgents, unless we attacked the source in Hanoi); and the risk of escalation into a major war in Asia.

It was in the face of all these possible drawbacks that he made his recommendation to introduce a task force without delay — made it on the grounds that a U.S. program to save South Vietnam simply would not succeed without it.

Thus, the initial task force was presented as necessary to success. Would it also be sufficient? Certainly not in case of invasion, which it might possibly provoke; in that case, it was made clear, the initial 8,000–10,000 troops would be no more than an advance

<sup>15</sup> Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, *op. cit.* p. 504.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



guard. But even short of that contingency, the report emphasized that continued infiltration — which was more likely than not — would require not only larger U.S. forces, but the bombing of North Vietnam. In Schlesinger's words:

Taylor and Rostow *hoped* that *this* program [i.e. including the Task Force] would suffice to win the civil war — and were sure it would *if only* the infiltration from the north could be stopped. But if it continued, then they could see no end to the war. They therefore raised the question of how long Saigon and the United States could be expected to play by the existing ground rules, which permitted North Vietnam to train and supply guerrillas from across the border and denied South Vietnam [sic] the right to strike back at the source of aggression. Rostow argued so forcibly for a contingency policy of retaliation against the north, graduated to match the intensity of Hanoi's support of the Viet Cong, that "Rostow Plan 6" became jocularly established in the contingency planning somewhere after SEATO plan 5.<sup>17</sup>

In the spring of 1961, for an audience at the Fort Bragg Special Forces School and later in public writings, Rostow had described the "sending of men and arms across international boundaries and the direction of guerrilla war from outside a sovereign nation" as a new form of aggression, calling for unilateral retaliation against the "ultimate source of aggression" in the absence of international action.<sup>18</sup> (Apparently the major lesson Rostow and Taylor had learned from the Bay of Pigs operation, which took place about the same time as Rostow's speech, was that Castro, or Khrushchev, had the right to bomb Florida, and Washington.)

In a passage of his report later revealed by President Johnson, Taylor foreshadowed the "Rolling Thunder" bombing campaign that Johnson initiated three years later, when Taylor was Ambassador to South Vietnam:

It is clear to me that the time may come in our relations to Southeast Asia when we must declare our intention to attack

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 505.

<sup>18</sup> W. W. Rostow, "Guerrilla Warfare in Underdeveloped Areas," in T. N. Greene (ed.), *The Guerrilla—And How to Fight Him* (New York: Praeger, 1962), p. 60.

the source of guerrilla aggression in North Vietnam and impose on the Hanoi Government a price for participating in the current war which is commensurate with the damage being inflicted on its neighbors to the south.<sup>19</sup>

Such were the views of President Kennedy's most trusted military advisor, whom he had brought out of retirement and later named Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Sent to Vietnam precisely to evaluate which, if any, of several proposed schemes of U.S. combat deployment to Vietnam would be appropriate, Taylor came back to tell the President his answer: The situation was "serious but not hopeless," i.e., not hopeless if and only if the President promptly dispatched sizeable U.S. combat units, with the understanding that more troops, and bombing of the North, would probably be required as later steps.

The initial program, as a whole, was presented as adequate for the short run; probably inadequate for the long run, requiring major additional measures; almost surely inadequate for both long-run and short-run aims without the vital element of the task force, for which there was no convincing substitute.

President Kennedy bought the program minus the task force.

Nor was this rejection of the task force because Taylor and Rostow were alone in their advocacy of it. As Sorensen reveals, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had advocated a commitment of U.S. ground troops to Vietnam (and/or Laos) as early as May 1961, as had an interagency task force.<sup>20</sup> After Taylor's return, the Joint Chiefs of Staff reiterated this recommendation. Moreover, they subscribed to Taylor's emphasis on its urgency and, among the whole shopping list of proposals, its critical role. Moreover, in the first week in November 1961, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and his Deputy, Roswell Gilpatric, strongly associated themselves with the appreciation and recommendations of Taylor and the JCS.

It must be underscored that there was no haziness in internal discussion about the distinction between U.S. ground combat units, on the one hand, and the mixed bag of advisors, logistics,

<sup>19</sup> Letter from President Johnson to Senator Henry M. Jackson, quoting the "Taylor Report," *New York Times* (March 3, 1967); cited in Chester L. Cooper, *The Lost Crusade* (New York, 1970).

<sup>20</sup> Sorensen, *op. cit.*, p. 652.

and combat support troops, including intelligence, communications, and helicopter personnel, on the other. These two categories were regarded by all as posing very different risks and benefits; and by October 1961, even prior to Taylor's trip, it was regarded as almost a foregone conclusion that the latter would be supplied.

Given the expectation prior to the Taylor-Rostow Mission that at least the advisory build-up and other measures short of troops would be approved, and given the recommendations he actually received, it seems likely that the President himself and his high-level advisors regarded his rejection of the proposal to send combat units immediately as his most, perhaps *only* significant decision of the period (although, as such, it was successfully concealed from the public). As Sorensen puts it: "All his principal advisers on Vietnam favored it,"<sup>21</sup> calling it the 'touchstone' of our good faith, a symbol of our determination. But the President in effect voted 'no' — and only his vote counted."<sup>22</sup> Yet at the same time the President voted "yes" to a set of remaining programs which every one of his advisors described as almost surely inadequate in the light of his various "no's," and perhaps in any case: inadequate not only to achieve long-run success but to avoid further deterioration in the mid-term.

Why the President may have cast his pair of votes this way is a question for later — and more speculative — discussion; likewise, the consequences of his doing so, and a critical evaluation of such choices. What can be said unequivocally about this description of the alternatives and forecasts presented to Kennedy, and of his choice, is that it flatly contradicts Schlesinger's "quagmire" model. It defines what is to be explained about the actual decision process in terms quite different from Schlesinger's.

There is no basis whatever for describing the President in this instance as taking a "small step" because he was promised success with it, or because it was "reasonably regarded as the last that would be necessary." What he was told was the contrary, and that from virtually every source. His decisions, he was assured, held out the almost certain prospect that new, larger steps, or else retreat, would present themselves as hard choices in the not-distant future.

The "promise" of inadequacy of the chosen measures was not

<sup>21</sup> It is not clear that this was true of Rusk at this time.

<sup>22</sup> Sorensen, *op. cit.*, p. 653.



limited to the Pentagon, nor did it relate merely to the omission of combat forces. Each agency had its own top candidates for features of U.S. policy "essential" to success in Vietnam. Before the year was out, the policy had given up pretensions, at least temporarily, to maintaining any one of these features.

Thus the State Department pressed political reforms and "broadening" of the Saigon regime as "essential"; without these, it was judged, even the full military commitment recommended by the Pentagon would probably fail. In Saigon, the MAAG continued to emphasize administrative and command changes as "essential" to long-run success.

Both of these proposals had bureaucratic opponents who argued that however useful or even necessary they might be in the long run, they were risky or "counterproductive" in the short term: "rocking the boat," risking the stability of the Diem regime or U.S. influence on it needed for more pressing matters. Nevertheless, in contrast to the proposed combat task force both of these sorts of "reforms" were included in the programs determined by Kennedy in mid-November and presented by the Ambassador to President Diem. By December or January, both had been, for practical purposes, abandoned. Critical measures urged by AID and CIA met the same fate.

Advocates of short-run priorities had won out bureaucratically, in the face of Diem's open resistance to these attempted "interventions." (Diem's intransigence and U.S. lack of "leverage" were even more marked than usual, reflecting embarrassment on both sides that he was getting neither the bilateral defense treaty for which he had privately asked nor the U.S. troop commitment for which Taylor had led him to hope.) Thus, the new presidential program for Vietnam preserved the peculiar character of omitting every feature emphasized by any U.S. agency — or by the Diem regime — as "essential" to longer-run success.

The President, of course, had his reasons. Many of them were good enough reasons, even in retrospect. But they had little to do either with optimism or inattention. For one thing, John F. Kennedy, who had first visited Indochina in 1951 and had criticized the French effort and U.S. intervention in the Senate, was one of the few officials — George Ball was another — who both knew the French experience and could perceive it as a warning even to Americans.

Moreover, by November, 1961, President Kennedy — “his skepticism deepened by the Bay of Pigs experience and the holes in the Laos report”<sup>23</sup> — had bureaucratic lessons of his own to draw upon. Both bodies of experience pointed to the same moral: the threat of quicksand. Or, to change the metaphor, as Kennedy did in a pithy remark to Schlesinger relating to Taylor’s request, the risk of addiction:

They want a force of American troops. . . . They say it’s necessary in order to restore confidence and maintain morale. But it will be just like Berlin. The troops will march in; the bands will play; the crowds will cheer; and in four days everyone will have forgotten. Then we will be told we have to send in more troops. It’s like taking a drink. The effect wears off, and you take another.<sup>24</sup>

“Yet” — the sympathetic historian is forced to record — “he felt obliged to offer a small drink himself, and he increased the number of advisers.”

More drinks were still to come. At the end of 1961 there were 1,364 American military personnel in South Vietnam; and the end of 1962, 9,865; at the time of Kennedy’s death in November 1963, about 15,000. This was the policy of ‘one more step’. . . .<sup>25</sup>

Why? Why that small drink? Ignorance of the risks of addiction is belied by Schlesinger’s own anecdote of his conversation with the President; belief that one small drink was all that the doctor ordered, as Schlesinger’s generalization implies, is belied by his whole account. If the President was not willing to do more than he did, why did he not do much less? Why court both commitment and costly failure?

### *Two Decades of Choosing Stalemate*

It appears, in the light of internal documentation, that the elements of paradox above apply virtually across-the-board to major

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 652.

<sup>24</sup> Schlesinger, *The Bitter Heritage*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

presidential initiatives on Vietnam over the last two decades. (This study, however, addresses decisions only through 1968.) No more than in 1961 were the measures of increased involvement that were actually adopted promised or expected to be adequate "last steps" or, indeed, anything but holding actions, adequate to avoid defeat in the short run but long shots so far as ultimate success was concerned. This is true of each of the major years of decision over that generation:

1. 1950, when the first \$10 million in credits were granted by the Truman administration to the French and Vietnamese efforts against the Viet Minh (in May, a month before the Korean invasion);
2. 1954, when direct entry into the war was considered and rejected by Eisenhower, followed by a gradually hardening commitment to the support of Diem;
3. late-1961;
4. 1963, the Kennedy decision to encourage the overthrow of Diem;
5. 1965, the Johnson decisions to bomb North Vietnam, then to deploy U.S. troops in limited numbers to South Vietnam and employ U.S. air support, then after mid-July, to accept open-ended ground force commitment;
6. 1968, when proposals to mobilize reserves and expand the war to Cambodia and Laos were considered and rejected, followed by "Vietnamization" and talks.

In some of these years — e.g., 1954, 1961, 1965, 1968 — certain approaches were presented by their proponents as winning strategies — and this reassurance that a "win" was possible may have had some influence on the climate of policy-making — but these were never the options chosen. This fact underscores the perceived inadequacy of the courses actually adopted, which emerges even more directly from intelligence estimates at the time; these estimates rarely endorsed even the optimistic claims made by "operators" for the more drastic proposals that were rejected. In other years — e.g., 1950, 1955–56 — the policy followed was seen by all as about the best available, yet offering little promise of victory.

In fact, perhaps the most striking discovery to be made by someone surveying the internal documentation for the first time (probably approaching it with something like the quicksand model



in mind) is the persistent skepticism about long-run non-Communist prospects and about proposals for improving them, a pessimism almost unrelieved, often stark — yet in retrospect, creditably realistic, frank, cogent — that runs through the intelligence estimates. That is true especially from 1950 through 1961, but after as well.

As for policy analyses and proposals, as distinct from intelligence estimates, one peculiar format for major recommendations on policy is so generally characteristic that it might be called the Proposal Pattern, or more suggestively (since these recommendations came close to adoption, or were chosen, only in crisis periods) the Desperate Proposal Pattern. This takes the form, not (as the quagmire model suggests) "Do this, because it will work, or, work better, cheaper, faster, or with less risk," but simply "Do this — because the *alternatives* are *certain to fail* — and failure would be 'unacceptable, intolerable.'"

It is of the essence of the Desperate Proposal Pattern (DPP) that these limited assertions are *all there is to it*. There is no mention, in particular, that the proposed approach itself will work, with any degree of probability. Although it is implied, and sometimes stated, that the proposed course *might* "succeed," in contrast to alternatives, there is no mention at all of the probable total scale or costs of the recommended program or, even roughly, its probability of success, or the consequences of failure.

How could decision-making proceed on such a basis? How could Presidents, time after time, tolerate recommendations being presented in such a form, without pressing for more information?

To come thus close to the fine grain of official choices on Vietnam is to be confronted with puzzles and doubts, to be mired, indeed, in uncertainties. What seemed clear as one listened to speeches, or observed official actions, or compared the two, is less so when files are opened, and concealed actions, official estimates, and internal arguments emerge. Under the magnifying lens, previously evident over-all patterns — like the quagmire hypothesis — dissolve like the canals on Mars.

As Leslie Gelb sums up this long period, in an important forthcoming paper:<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Leslie H. Gelb, "Vietnam: The System Worked," revised version of a paper delivered at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association,

The system worked. The story of United States policy toward Vietnam is either far better or far worse than supposed. Our Presidents and most of those who influenced their decisions did not stumble step-by-step into Vietnam, unaware of the quagmire. U.S. involvement did not stem from a failure to foresee consequences.

Almost regardless of his attitudes on the war, a reader is likely to rise from a survey of internal evidence baffled and troubled, with the question on his mind: "How could they?" How could four Presidents — Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson — in the face of estimates and program analyses and recommendations like these, so persistently have chosen what were almost always presented at the time of decision as long shots, almost surely inadequate in the long run, potentially costly and risky, in favor either of measures purported to be more effective or of lesser involvement?

Documentary evidence on the internal decision-making process is far from adequate to answer the critical question of what considerations were salient to presidential attention at a given moment. The President — having no formal need to persuade a superior, to coordinate a proposal or to justify a decision internally — puts much less down on paper than other participants in the bureaucratic process. Because of his overlapping roles, he conceals or dissembles his own views even more than other participants, except selectively to his closest associates. They in turn guard them closely, for reasons of loyalty, their own access, and politics, even when they later come to write "history."

In fact, certain general considerations caution the analyst/historian not to take the mosaic of bureaucratic inputs to presidential decision as a close or highly reliable guide to the President's own view of a matter, his private expectations and aims.

First, the President may, to some degree, disbelieve the esti-

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Los Angeles, September 1970, to be published in a forthcoming issue of *Foreign Policy*.

I am happy to acknowledge great stimulation from discussions with Gelb—now at the Brookings Institution, formerly an acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense (ISA)—whose studies of the earlier periods preceded my own and who in particular pointed out that the propositions emerging from my study of 1961 and my experience in 1964–1965 applied as well to decisions going back to the 1940s and 1950s.

mates. He may believe that a pessimistic tone reflects a bias, or a bureaucratic hedge. (Although in retrospect, the intelligence analyses of the 1950s, and to a somewhat lesser extent the 1960s, look realistic, not vague or excessive, in their pessimism; they read well today.)

As for claims that measures he has decided to reject or postpone are "essential," he may feel (often with justice) that this language is largely a bureaucratic ploy, an attempt to tie his hands or to make a record as a future hedge.

Most Presidents probably acquire, fairly quickly, some skepticism about assertions that they "must" act *immediately*, or adopt a proposal in full or on a vast scale, if they are to avoid disaster or have any likelihood of success. They are likely to be drawn to converting a program into a sequential decision, "buying time, awaiting information, keeping options open." They can also claim to be doing so, as a way of rejecting a proposal without foreclosing its proponents' hopes.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, as Richard Moorsteen has pointed out to me, many Presidents, as successful politicians, are likely to exhibit these same traits for temperamental reasons as well. A strong focus on the short run, a hopeful attitude toward one's future, a tendency to put off painful decisions in the hope, and with some confidence, that "something will turn up" (to make the decision either unnecessary, or easier): All these are part of the typical make-up of a politician. A President, as Moorsteen puts it, will have attained that office only by winning a long succession of long shots; by the time he gets there he is likely to have a strong belief in his lucky star, a confidence that he can get away with what looks like chance-taking where others might not, confidence that something will always turn up for him. A Bay of Pigs experience comes to him as a special shock; yet even that will probably not erase the traits permanently.

These considerations go some part of the way to explain discrepancies between the President's views and choices and the esti-

<sup>27</sup> This is what Hilsman claims Kennedy did with the proposal to send combat forces in 1961. "In an interesting example of one type of gambit in the politics of Washington policy-making, the President avoided a direct 'no' to the proposal for introducing troops." See Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), p. 121. Such a tactic could account for the success of efforts to keep secret the Taylor/JCS recommendations to send troops. The hope of still persuading the President would discourage leaks among proponents of the measure.



mates and proposals pressed on him by his advisers. But they cannot really bear the main weight of explanation. To explain these actual discrepancies almost wholly in terms of presidential operating traits or temperament, for example, would imply White House wishfulness, or a general and exclusive focus upon the short run, so extreme as to seem almost psychotic. Rather, it is likely that the factors above did work marginal differences in degree in the President's thinking from that of his advisers, but unlikely that they counted for more than that. There is simply no evidence that, in any instance, a President was radically more optimistic than the expressed appreciations of odds and possibilities presented to him: a conclusion which leaves us still facing the earlier puzzles.

Thus, when all this is said, the stumbling-into-quicksand image cannot be revived when one looks at the internal record. Instead one sees, repeatedly, a leader striding with his eyes open into what he *sees* as quicksand, renewing efforts and carrying his followers deeper in, knowingly. Why? Presumably, because he sees no alternative, and hopes to find a way through, or because the alternatives seem even more threatening, worse in the short run. But what is the alternative future that the DPP describes as "intolerable"? What is the failure so ominous that it must be postponed at such costs, while concealing its prospect from the public?

Looking only at the set of critical decision points, one sees, not an unwary traveller miring down imperceptibly, but a different image: Eliza, fleeing across the broken ice of the river, leaping from block to block as each begins to slip. . . . And the question becomes: What whips threaten, what are the hounds that bay on the departed shore?

In one period, at least, 1949–1950, the identity of the pursuers was in little doubt. A close look at that decision point — when lack of prior involvement screens out several of the hypotheses competing for attention later — suggests answers to many of the questions raised so far.

### *1950: The Edge of the Bog*

At the time an American President first left solid ground behind to step into the Indochina War, the main pursuers to his rear had

known faces and names, and their accents were American. The voices included those of such Senators as William Knowland, Styles Bridges, Kenneth Wherry, and Pat McCarran, three "Asia-first" Republicans and a right-wing Democrat, who denounced the China White Paper issued by the State Department on August 5, 1949, as "a 1,054-page whitewash of a wishful, do-nothing policy which has succeeded only in placing Asia in danger of Soviet conquest."<sup>28</sup> And even Arthur Vandenberg: "I think we virtually 'sold China down the river' at Yalta and Potsdam and in our subsequent official demands for coalition with the armed Chinese Communists."<sup>29</sup> And Richard Nixon, whose questioning of Alger Hiss in 1948 had broken down the Hiss defense and whose efforts were more responsible than any others in bringing an indictment against Hiss (and helped him defeat Helen Douglas for the Senate in the fall of 1950 on the theme of her "soft attitude toward Communism"). But also, a man who was to defeat Richard Nixon a decade later — in part on the charge that the Republicans had lost Cuba to Communism — who was granted one minute to address the House as follows on January 25, 1949:

Mr. Speaker, over this week end we have learned the extent of the disaster that has befallen China and the United States. The responsibility for the failure of our foreign policy in the Far East rests squarely with the White House and the Department of State.

The continued insistence that aid would not be forthcoming unless a coalition government with the Communists was formed, was a crippling blow to the National Government.

So concerned were our diplomats and their advisers, the Lattimores and the Fairbanks, with the imperfection of the democratic system in China after 20 years of war and the tales of corruption in high places that they lost sight of our tremendous stake in a non-Communist China.

Our policy, in the words of the Premier of the National Government, Sun Fo, of vacillation, uncertainty, and confusion has reaped the whirlwind.

<sup>28</sup> Norman Graebner, *The New Isolationism* (New York: Ronald Press, 1956), p. 45.

<sup>29</sup> Arthur H. Vandenberg, Jr. (ed.), *The Private Papers of Senator Vandenberg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1952), p. 536.

This House must now assume the responsibility of preventing the onrushing tide of Communism from engulfing all of Asia.<sup>30</sup>

Thus the Democratic Representative from Massachusetts, John F. Kennedy.

Above all, by the spring of 1950 there was the voice of Senator Joe McCarthy, whose sensational charges of Communist infiltration of the State Department began 18 days after Hiss was convicted in a second trial — or two weeks after Secretary of State Acheson announced, "I will not turn my back on Alger Hiss" — with his speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, on February 9, 1950.

"How can we account for our present situation," McCarthy was to ask later,

unless we believe that men high in this government are concerting to deliver us to disaster? This must be the product of a great conspiracy on a scale so immense as to dwarf any previous venture in the history of man.<sup>31</sup>

Or more specifically, in a Senate speech on March 30, 1950:

It was not Chinese democracy under Mao that conquered China, as Acheson, Lattimore, Jessup and Hanson contend. Soviet Russia conquered China and an important ally of the conquerors was this small left-wing element in our Department of State.<sup>32</sup>

In less than nine months, criticism of "our loss of China" had moved from condemnation of our "wishful, do-nothing" policy to discern a more sinister meaning in what had seemed passivity. As Graebner paraphrases the attack:

United States policy failed, in short, because it had pursued the goals, not of this nation, but of the Soviet Union.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, in December 1949, Chinese Communist troops had reached the borders of Indochina. At that point, granted sanc-

<sup>30</sup> *Congressional Record—House* (January 25, 1949), pp. 532, 533.

<sup>31</sup> Graebner, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> Alan D. Harper, *The Politics of Loyalty* (Westport: Greenwood, 1969), p. 133.

<sup>33</sup> Graebner, *op. cit.*, p. 45.



tuary, supplies and expert advisers, it became virtually impossible for the Communist-led nationalist forces of the Viet Minh to lose to the French. But for the same reason, given the domestic environment in the U.S. described above, it had become "intolerable" to the Truman Administration that they should win.

Acheson's White Paper on China in 1949 had concluded:

The unfortunate but inescapable fact is that the ominous result of the civil war in China was beyond the control of the government of the United States. Nothing that this country did or could have done within the reasonable limits of its capabilities could have changed that result; nothing that was left undone by this country has contributed to it. It was the product of internal Chinese forces, forces which this country tried to influence but could not. A decision was arrived at within China, if only a decision by default.<sup>34</sup>

There is a statement that might have suggested itself, in every year from 1949 to the present, as providing the format for explaining a U.S. government decision to abstain or extricate itself from involvement in Indochina. But it is doubtful if that thought ever came to bureaucratic consciousness; the reception of the China White Paper did not encourage it. The argument simply did not "sell," even though its logic rested on the facts that opposing forces in China were immense and dynamic, no American troops were engaged, and there was no real U.S. support for their involvement. As Acheson has put it recently, the conclusion above "was unpalatable to believers in American omnipotence, to whom every goal unattained is explicable only by incompetence or treason."<sup>35</sup> What the State Department learned then, and evidently has never forgotten, was the number of such believers, and their power to wreck policies, administrations, . . . and careers.

In this atmosphere there was no impatience in the State Department to commence the drafting of a parallel Indochina White Paper. In Indochina the battle against Communist-led guerrillas, whose ultimate direction — here Acheson agreed with his attackers — was seen in "the Kremlin," was being carried by Western troops

<sup>34</sup> *United States Relations with China, with Special Reference to the Period 1944-1949* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949), p. xvi.

<sup>35</sup> Dean Acheson, *Present at the Creation* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 303.

unquestionably able and willing to utilize U.S. materiel. No U.S. troops were needed, or desired: at least, to avert defeat, to bring about a stalemate. On the other hand, temporary stalemate was about all that U.S. estimates offered as the outcome of U.S. aid at that time: at least, in the absence of changes in political strategy that France was extremely unlikely to adopt. Yet the need was urgent; official estimates at the end of 1949 gave French forces in Tonkin only six to nine more months, lacking U.S. aid.

In February 1949, at the apparent initiative of the new Secretary of State, Acheson, the NSC had recommended withholding supplies already earmarked for China. Senator Vandenberg argued successfully against the move, even though he admitted that Communist victory seemed inevitable; "I decline to be responsible for the *last push* which makes it possible."<sup>36</sup> The aid continued; even this did little to protect the administration from its critics, yet it was becoming evident that to have done any less would have been still more risky, more ominously "questionable."

A year later, the position of a proponent within the State Department for withholding military aid from our NATO ally, France, thereby accepting full responsibility for its prompt defeat in Indochina by the forces of the Kremlin, would have been an isolated one. And this despite the fact that estimates at the time held out scant hope that France would accept the political strategies that alone might give a significant chance of ultimate victory.

No matter how slim the probability of "winning," there was little debate within the government as to whether the open-ended direct aid policy we commenced in May 1950, with a first installment of \$10 million, was worthwhile. It could (and did) buy a stalemate; and the alternative was to add the Democrats' "loss" of Indochina to their "loss" of China. That was enough to know. To postpone the loss of Tonkin beyond the tenure of the Truman Administration evidently seemed worth more than the several billion dollars (and one must add, the French and Vietnamese lives) that it cost.

What leads one to what would otherwise seem a harsh and cynical interpretation is, beside the fact of timing, the great difficulty otherwise of explaining a decision directly to involve our-

<sup>36</sup> Vandenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 532; italics in original.

selves in this struggle — against what was perceived within the U.S. government as a nationalist movement, Communist-led but with the support of the great majority of Vietnamese people — especially given the extreme pessimism of official estimates concerning French prospects in the long run, even with our aid. No more in this first instance than in later ones did the promise of the quicksand model apply: “one small step promising success.”

Moreover, other hypotheses on possible motives for accepting a long shot, plausible in later periods, cannot apply here. In 1950, it could not be said that we had to carry out prior commitments or promises; or that our prestige rested on earlier involvement; or that, our own forces having been engaged, we could not afford our own “military defeat.”

The relevant events determining our response had taken place outside Indochina. They were the fall of China, following earlier disappointments in Eastern Europe, the Czech coup, and in general, the Cold War; and the response of Republican leadership to these events and to the stunning frustration of their 1948 electoral defeat. (Senator Taft’s decision to back McCarthy was an important part of this response.) After these developments, even had there been no prior U.S. involvement in Indochina, “a communist victory in Asia that the U.S. might have prevented” was sure to be read as a defeat for the U.S., a culpable failure by the administration, a basis, even, for charges of conscious treachery.

The facts that involvement posed the likelihood of greater costs in future, risks, even, of major war with China or Russia if the Chinese Communists should enter, all uncompensated by significant promise of eventual success: none of this outweighed the credible promise of intervention to “buy time,” i.e., to *postpone defeat*, and to avert the political and personal consequences of charges of “softness on Communism.”

With the outbreak of the Korean War, followed rapidly by public disenchantment (and charges that Acheson had even invited it), the message of Republican victories in the fall, and above all the entry of the Chinese Communists into the war, all the earlier motives were sharpened for “buying time” in Indochina. But still not “at any price.” Despite the renewed judgment that the strategic stakes in Southeast Asia were of the highest order, there was even less interest than before in committing U.S.



ground troops to Indochina. The "Never Again Club" in the Pentagon was in the process of consolidating. And controversy over General MacArthur's dismissal in April 1951 both mobilized critics of administration policy and publicized a premise already present earlier in the attacks by the "Asia-first" Republicans. This was a belief that "victory" was not only, as MacArthur emphasized, indispensable, but that it could be had on the cheap, by a patriotic and resolute administration: by a combination of commitment to victory, unrestrained use of airpower, and strong support of Asian allies.<sup>37</sup> To have to employ U.S. ground troops against Asians showed weak strategy, incompetence, irresolution, or neglect of potential Asian allied troops; to lose an area to Communism marked either culpable negligence or treason.

Anyone who has witnessed from inside the U.S. government decision-making on Indochina in such a period as, say, the autumn of 1964 (perhaps the nadir of U.S. hopes regarding South Vietnam in the last decade) will almost surely feel on reading accounts<sup>38</sup> of the 1948-1954 period that he is learning, at last, the genesis of many bureaucratic-political premises of the later debate. Such books describe the events that scratched the minds of a generation of bureaucrats and politicians.

Patterns evident today that become immediately explicable from this history, in career and party terms, include powerful inhibitions against:

1. Proposing "coalition" with Communists (as Marshall was charged with doing in China), or regarding local accommodation as less than tantamount to Communist victory;
2. Pressuring an Asian ally toward "reforms," to the point of risking the charge of weakening his confidence or political base or military capability;
3. Regarding Communist adversaries as anything but terrorists and aggressors (though blessed with "organizational skills");

<sup>37</sup> See Harper, *op. cit.*, chaps. 5 and 9; and Graebner, *op. cit.*, chaps. 3 and 5.

<sup>38</sup> In addition to those cited, see in particular Tang Tsou, *America's Failure in China, 1941-50* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963); H. Bradford Westerfield, *Foreign Policy and Party Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955); and Earl Latham, *The Community Controversy in Washington* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966). And look again at the 1949 quotation presented earlier from John F. Kennedy.

4. Withholding approval, indefinitely, from military proposals for "victory through airpower";

5. Strongly questioning the assurance, speed, or impact on U.S. interest of an Asian "accommodation" to the Communists after Communist victory in South Vietnam (the "domino theory");

6. Appearing to "do nothing" in face of a possible "loss to Communism" (whether or not an action of any promise of effectiveness is at hand); or regarding such a possible loss as anything but "intolerable."<sup>39</sup>

Thus, for example, in illustration of the last point, an argument made in late 1964 and early 1965 for commencing the bombing of North Vietnam by some who did not hold out high hopes for its effect on the North Vietnamese efforts was that "even if it failed, it would have been worthwhile; it would have demonstrated our willingness to risk, to bloody our opponent, to go the last mile for an ally. . . ." Demonstrate to whom? Allegedly, to foreigners: opponents and allies. Yet the confident assurance—mocked by events—that such benefits would outweigh costs and risks seemed peculiar, even at the time; unless one noted that "doing something" to hurt Communist opponents, no matter how costly and unpromising, would be strong protection against domestic charges of culpable underestimation of a Communist threat, or of defeatism, or even—fantastic as these would have seemed before 1950—of literal treason.

Officials writing such phrases in internal memoranda in 1964 had almost surely not read Vandenberg's diary on his 1949 plea—"I decline to be responsible for the *last push* . . ."—but its bureaucratic echoes had lasted fifteen years. What had been lost to memory was Acheson's counterargument, as expressed at the beginning of 1950 with reference to American involvement in the defense of Formosa: "The Chiefs again objected to the involvement of American forces but proposed some funds for military materiel and a fact-finding mission. I objected to this *toying with*

<sup>39</sup> This last evaluation—unchallengeable bureaucratically, by prudent rules of the game since 1950—leads directly to the logic of the Desperate Proposal Pattern. To avoid an "intolerable" (infinitely negative) outcome, any measure with *some* chance of success is justified, no matter how low its probability of success, or how high its cost and risks. Hence no need to report or even calculate the latter characteristics: enough to say that, unlike current policy, the one proposed is not *certain* to fail.

*the mousetrap. . . .*"<sup>40</sup> To a reader in 1971, that last comment appears almost stunning in its cogency and prescience. Yet to an impartial political scientist writing in the mid-1950s, it marked an attitude and a set of tactics that were simply "politically fool-hardy":

Now, it may be true that Chiang could have been saved only by very large-scale intervention by the United State "beyond the reasonable limits of its capabilities" (as Acheson asserted in the 1949 White Paper). But it seems to be carrying logic in the conduct of foreign affairs to self-defeating extremes to make that belief a justification for attempting to block *all* substantial aid, in order to cut American losses. By spending expeditiously a few hundred million more on military aid, as the GOP requested, and by sending as many military advisers as could possibly be spared, the State Department in 1947 could probably still have forced the Republicans to share public responsibility for any later decision to cut the losses. . . . If then the American public had shown a willingness to press on, the rewards of victory or even of stalemate would have been vastly greater than was eventually the case in Korea.<sup>41</sup>

There is the domestic political case for "toying with mousetraps": even if the outcome should be the "rewards of stalemate." That was the lesson that stuck, for Acheson and a generation of successors, when it came to drawing morals for Indochina from the debacle of China policy.

Of course, to point to domestic political considerations as of critical importance to a particular foreign policy decision is not to say either that (1) *only* such domestic concerns figured in the decision; or (2) domestic and international-strategic factors were independent; or (3) domestic considerations were of only one simple sort, e.g., winning the next presidential election. Let us consider these points in reverse order.

Relevant aspects of domestic "politics" that can be influenced by or influence a particular foreign policy include: the prospects of passing a current legislative program (e.g., the Great Society

<sup>40</sup> Acheson, *op. cit.*, p. 350; italics added.

<sup>41</sup> Westerfield, *op. cit.*, p. 258.



program in 1964); the composition of the next Congress, with its implications for subsequent programs and elections; a President's chances for renomination by his own party, as well as for reelection (see 1968); the prospects of tumultuous controversy during primaries and the election campaign, with its implications for effective governing (again, 1968); the future of one's party (e.g., the feasibility in the 1970s of creating a "new Republican majority"); a President's reputation, his place in history, and his own self-respect (thus, the concern of both Johnson and Nixon not to be "the first U.S. President to lose a war").

Each of these considerations interacts with strategic concerns or with other matters of domestic policy. No President, after all, believes that victory for himself or his party, or the defeat of a particular opponent, is of no more than selfish interest to himself and his supporters: Important issues of foreign and domestic policy and concern are seen as dependent on these legislative and electoral outcomes. And a "humiliation" for an American President is seen—especially by that President, but not only by him—as inevitably a setback for the prestige and influence of the United States as well.

Moreover, to somewhat varying degree, each one of these post-war Presidents has been a "true believer" in the premises of cold-war policy that have figured consistently in their rhetoric. And they themselves have contributed crucially to making these premises influential factors in domestic politics, matters of potential vulnerability for an incumbent. Thus, in their eyes, the imperatives of domestic politics point in the same general direction as do their instincts of "what is right for America."

In the spring of 1950, although Indochina was surely not prominent among the concerns of officials of the Truman administration, all the considerations above pointed to one conclusion, sufficient to determine policy: "This is not a good year for this administration to lose Vietnam to Communism."

Nor was 1951. Or 1952. Korea, the Chinese Communists, MacArthur, an upcoming presidential election, all ensured that.

Nor—for a new administration that had come to office on charges of Democratic "losses" and with loud talk of "rollback" and of "unleashing" Chiang—was 1953 a good year to abandon Vietnam; or, after 1954, South Vietnam. . . .

A decade after 1950, a new Democratic President inherited the task, among others, that he had defined sometime earlier: "preventing the onrushing tide of Communism from engulfing all of Asia." Nine months into his first year in office, he had experienced the Bay of Pigs, the need to seek a negotiated—and probably unstable—settlement in Laos, Vienna, the Wall and Khrushchev's threats on Berlin, and the resumption of Soviet nuclear testing. After all this, John F. Kennedy found 1961, like 1950 and the years between, a bad time to decide to lose South Vietnam to Communism.

Likewise, most of 1962. Yet by that year's end, the situation might have been seen differently, at least on the international front. The Cuban Missile Crisis had established Kennedy's resolve, split further the Soviets and Chinese Communists, ended the Berlin confrontation and prepared the way for the test ban. At the same time, Kennedy's White House Chief of Staff, Kenneth O'Donnell, has revealed, the mood of optimism about Vietnam that had set in during 1962 had been drained for his boss by the end of the year, and still more by the following spring.

In O'Donnell's account,<sup>42</sup> seconded by Senator Mansfield, Kennedy had been disturbed in late 1962 to find himself agreeing with an unexpected argument by Mansfield that he should stop sending more military reinforcements to South Vietnam and then withdraw all U.S. forces from that country's civil war.

A continued steady increase of American military advisers in South Vietnam, the Senator argued, would lead to sending still more forces to beef up those that were there, and soon the Americans would be dominating the combat in a civil war that was not our war. Taking over the military leadership and fighting in the Vietnam war, Mansfield warned, would hurt American prestige in Asia and would not help the South Vietnamese to stand on their own two feet, either.

Impressed, Kennedy still did not change his public position on the need for U.S. support of Diem. But when Mansfield renewed the argument in the spring of 1963, the President called him in privately, and O'Donnell (a witness) reports:

<sup>42</sup> "LBJ and the Kennedys," *Life* (August 7, 1970). Mansfield was subsequently quoted in interviews as confirming in substance.

The President told Mansfield that he had been having serious second thoughts about Mansfield's argument and that he now agreed with the Senator's thinking on the need for a complete military withdrawal from Vietnam.

"But I can't do it until 1965—after I'm reelected," Kennedy told Mansfield.

President Kennedy felt, and Mansfield agreed with him, that if he announced a total withdrawal of American military personnel from Vietnam before the 1964 election, there would be a wild conservative outcry against returning him to the Presidency for a second term.

After Mansfield left the office, the President told me that he had made up his mind that after his reelection he would take the risk of unpopularity and make a complete withdrawal of American forces from Vietnam. "In 1965, I'll be damned everywhere as a Communist appeaser. But I don't care. If I tried to pull out completely now, we would have another Joe McCarthy red scare on our hands, but I can do it after I'm reelected. So we had better make damned sure that I *am* reelected."

There is no way, starting from O'Donnell's understanding of Kennedy's views at this time, to attribute either (1) the continued buildup of advisers throughout most of 1963, or (2) the encouragement of the Diem coup, or (3) Kennedy's continued avowals in 1963 of the domino credo and our unswerving commitment, either to (a) inattention or inadvertence, or (b) confidence in subordinates' optimistic promises, or (c) perception of "no alternative," due to the involvement or pledges of predecessors, or to international concerns.

Indeed, in the light of these revelations of the President's pessimism and intentions, there seems no way to read his measures in 1963 increasing or confirming national involvement in and commitment to the war in Vietnam, except as reflections of John Kennedy's judgment that 1963 was a worse time than 1965 for him to lose a war to Communists, so that he would just have to keep it going till then.

To be sure, "continuing a war" in Vietnam did not mean just the same thing in 1963 that it did in 1965, or 1970, especially for



Americans. As O'Donnell pointed out to me recently (February 24, 1971): "43 Americans had been killed in Vietnam at the time of President Kennedy's death. We lost that many in the last two weeks over Laos." (The difference for the Vietnamese between the two periods, although significant, was considerably less.)

Nevertheless, as quoted by O'Donnell, Kennedy did not even claim that he might avoid or reduce the "McCarthy red scare" by postponing it—"In 1965, I'll be damned everywhere as a Communist appeaser"—but merely that he could prevent it from interfering with his re-election. He proposed to do so by accepting two more years of U.S. involvement, with its evident risks—unless he were "damned sure" to be re-elected, and perhaps even then—of later escalation, U.S. combat involvement, vastly increased American and Vietnamese deaths, and domestic disaster.

All these risks were realized. Kennedy did not live either to win the election or to leave the war. Instead he willed the war to a President determined not to be the first to lose one, leaving an unchanged U.S. policy toward Vietnam to an insecure successor who had some reason to fear the political consequences—even at the hands of the dead President's heirs, officials, and supporters—of publicly abandoning it.

(The risk that "losing" Vietnam would pose some risk from a faction within the President's own party was one that Johnson in 1964 shared with Eisenhower in 1954. Even Richard Nixon has seen himself as facing comparable problems in 1969–1971, his Special Assistant Henry A. Kissinger has reported in numerous "backgrounders":

If we had done in our first year what our loudest critics called on us to do, the 13 percent that voted for Wallace would have grown to 35 or 40 percent; the first thing the President set out to do was to neutralize that faction.<sup>43</sup>)

Sorensen's final comments in *Kennedy* (published in 1965) on

<sup>43</sup> Derek Shearer, "Kissinger Road Show: An Evening with Henry," *The Nation* (March 8, 1971), 297, reporting on an off-the-record meeting with Kissinger at Endicott House, January 29, 1971. The quotation is accurate, although the political judgment seems highly dubious. It was for this reason, Kissinger explained, that the pace of "withdrawal" had been slow, although "We are ending the war . . . the war is trending down, and it will continue to trend down. . . ." (Unknown to his audience because of a news embargo, the bombing of Laos had been stepped up that evening to a near-record level, preparatory to invasion.)

his Chief's Vietnam legacy are not unduly upbeat, but they need interpreting. They begin:

He could show little gain in that situation to pass on to his successor, either in the military outlook or the progress toward reform. His own errors had not helped.<sup>44</sup>

In this, of course, Kennedy does not suffer by comparison with his two predecessors, or his successor. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., spans his account of the Kennedy term in *The Bitter Heritage* with the sentences: "In January, 1961 the Vietnam mess fell to a new American president . . . [in 1963] a new President inherited the trouble." From the President's perspective of 1961, was this failure, or was it reasonable success? Just the same statements, after all, could be said for the comparable milestones 1953, 1961, 1969. And in no case was this assessment at the end of a term worse than had been predicted internally—though this was not revealed to the public—at the earlier moment the President had chosen to sustain and deepen the nation's involvement. Had any of them honestly expected more (except for intermittent periods)? If not—as seems likely—what does this tell us about the pressures driving these four Presidents, about their aims and motives?

To go on with Sorensen:

But if asked why he had increased this nation's commitment, he might have summed up his stand with the words used by William Pitt when asked in the House of Commons in 1805 what was gained by the war against France: '*We have gained everything that we would have lost if we had not fought this war.*' In the case of Vietnam, that was a lot. (Italics added.)

Specifically, that was — as John F. Kennedy had hoped in 1963 <sup>45</sup> — a Democratic victory in 1964, although not for himself.

It does not seem enough.

### *The Stalemate Machine*

Although the data that have been discussed are adequate deci-

<sup>44</sup> Sorensen, *op. cit.*, p. 661: italics added.

<sup>45</sup> According to his White House Chief of Staff, O'Donnell.

sively to reject the Schlesinger "quagmire model" of the generation-long process of U.S. involvement, they do not point conclusively to an alternative. They do begin to suggest some answers to puzzles identified earlier, and it is time to draw these together.

What follows is a discussion of a particular "decision model"—in the form of "presidential decision rules in Vietnam crises"—that does, given actual perceptions and premises of Washington decision-makers, imply policy choices and executive performance conforming in considerable detail to those actually obtaining at major escalation points between 1950 and 1968. (Presidential decisions significantly escalating the nature of U.S. involvement have occurred, in fact, only in crisis situations of impending failure.) That is all I can say for it, at this point. I cannot prove, or even feel sure, that any particular President has actually seen his decision problem and constraints in just this way. Similar models but with different emphases can be equally consistent with the data; see, for example, Leslie Gelb's paper cited earlier. The same might be true for radically different approaches; however, none that I have seen or considered explains so well so many characteristics of the available data.

One of these characteristics happens to be the striking impression of the *sameness* of the bureaucratic debate, in substance, tone, and agency position, and of its relation to presidential choice, at decision points throughout the twenty-year period. This is in itself a surprising, if subjective, datum, given the differences in circumstances—e.g., the steadily rising level of prior U.S. involvement—and in the character of the several Presidents.

The obvious differences between administrations do not, after all, seem to have made much difference in Vietnam policy; at least, so far as concerns a determination to stay in Vietnam, to do what was necessary at any given time to avoid losing, and not, at that time, much more. (As Morton H. Halperin has pointed out, this does not mean that a permutation of the sequence of actual Presidents would have made no difference at all; for example, if Lyndon Johnson—or still more, Richard Nixon—had come earlier than he actually did, escalation might well have started sooner and gone further.) This sameness suggests that a single, perhaps complex, hypothesis might cover the whole set of decisions with more validity than a set of purely *ad hoc* ex-



planations. (To this degree, one sympathizes with Schlesinger's approach.)

In any case, it appears that an appropriate abstraction of elements of the initial 1950 decision to intervene—despite the lack of major prior commitment or involvement—fits very well all the major subsequent decisions to escalate or to prolong the war, at least through 1968 and probably beyond.

We have already seen one presidential ruling at work both in 1950 and 1961: "*This is a bad year for me to lose Vietnam to Communism.*" Along with some rules on constraints (see below), this amounts to a recursive formula for calculating presidential decisions on Vietnam realistically, given inputs on alternatives, anytime from 1950 on. The mix of motives behind this judgment can vary with circumstances and Presidents, but since 1950 a variety of domestic political considerations have virtually always been present. These have been sufficient underpinning in those years when (unlike, say, 1961) "strategic" concerns were not urgent.

In brief: A decade before what Schlesinger calls Kennedy's "low-level crisis" in South Vietnam, the right wing of the Republican Party tattooed on the skins of politicians and bureaucrats alike some vivid impressions of what could happen to a liberal administration that chanced to be in office the day a red flag rose over Saigon.<sup>46</sup>

Starting in early 1950, the first administration to learn painfully this "lesson of China" began to undertake—as in a game of Old Maid—to pass that contingency on to its successor. And each administration since has found itself caught in the same game.

Rule 1 of that game is: "*Do not lose the rest of Vietnam to Communist control before the next election.*"

<sup>46</sup> This lesson was implanted so powerfully between 1949 and 1954 that some special circumstances of that period, limiting its future validity, may well have been overlooked. Thus, Truman's startling victory in 1948, prolonging almost by accident what was already a sixteen-year Democratic reign, not only assured that Democrats would still be in office for the fast-approaching victory of Communists in China, but assured that this vulnerability would be exploited to the hilt, and beyond, by the madly frustrated Republicans. For a provocative discussion of this thesis, see Latham, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-7, 416-423.

Fear of McCarthy's and McCarthyism's power at the polls may always have been overdrawn, even in 1950-1952, and still more so today. See Michael Paul Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1967). Yet what matters, of course, is what Congressmen and officials believe their risks to be, and what risks they are willing to take. (See the citation of Kissinger earlier.)

But the rules do not end with that. There is also—ever since late 1950, when Chinese Communists entered Korea—Rule 2, which asserts among other things: "*Do not commit U.S. ground troops to a land war in Asia, either.*"

Breaking Rule 2 (which has some further clauses) will not expose one to the charge of treason, but otherwise the political risks—loss of electoral support, loss of Congress, loss of legislative program, loss of reputation—are about the same. And many of the very same pursuers who would be howling and pointing at the scent of a violation of the first rule would be among the pack chasing a President who proposed to ignore the second.

It so happens that a factional attitude within Congress or the public of intense appreciation of U.S. stakes in a non-Communist Southeast Asia does *not* go with a willingness politically to support costly or risky or domestically unpopular measures to protect those stakes. On the contrary, it tends to be coupled precisely with a determination to oppose and punish many such measures (in company with those who do not believe the stakes are all that important), because it is typically part of a philosophy asserting such efforts to be both unnecessary—to a patriotic and resolute administration willing to rely on Asian allies and the threat or use of U.S. airpower—and dangerous to the economy.

Suppose, then, an administration fears attack by or needs the support of the particular faction that holds these attitudes (which is suspected of being able to mobilize a much larger following on these issues in a crisis). What if the President is informed that he cannot avoid enraging that faction by losing part of Southeast Asia in the near future to Communist control, except by antagonizing other major groups (and perhaps it as well) by committing troops, or mobilizing reserves, or risking war with the Soviet Union or China?

In that case, the President is in a bind. The Indochina Bind.

That dilemma is all the more certain to recur because of some other politically-derived premises that constrict policy. One of the sacred beliefs, inherited from the late 1940s, that any U.S. official must appear to share (and probably does share) is that toleration of an overt Communist Party in a less-developed country, or a provisional or coalition government including Communists, must inevitably lead to total Communist domination.

Any prospects of these developments, then, are proscribed under Rule 1.

But that means that acceptable U.S. long-run aims for South Vietnam must be quite ambitious: the total exclusion from national power of the Communist Party; the assurance indefinitely of a totally non-Communist regime.

These were internally-stated U.S. goals until at least 1969; lest they appear too ambitious or interventionist, they were rarely spelled out publicly, and the public position was ambiguous. It is not clear yet—and appears doubtful—whether recent changes in public formulae correspond to genuine operational changes in the outcomes perceived as “tolerable.”

U.S. intelligence analyses have generally recognized that in the face of the actual strength of the Communist Party of Vietnam, such goals could not be achieved—without major U.S. involvement indefinitely—by the sort of narrow, conservative, foreign-oriented, anti-Communist, authoritarian regime (supported mainly by Catholics, the Army, bureaucrats, and the rich) that alone among Vietnamese political elements was willing to pursue such an aim. Hence, for the long-run goal of an acceptable outcome at an acceptable cost to the U.S., civilian analysts have regularly stressed “reform” and “broadening” of the Saigon regime.

But this runs into another sort of bind. For even proponents of those political changes admit that such a “broadened” government, or even U.S. pressures to achieve it or to reduce the influence of the Army, would increase to some degree the risk in the short run of “instability”—coups, chaos, military weakening, governmental paralysis—and thus quick Communist take-over. Thus any measures—U.S. “leverage,” political strategies, genuinely “revolutionary” social-political approaches, broad-based regimes—to achieve such long-run aims conflict directly with Rule 1, and perhaps with Rule 2 as well. The rules have always won out.

It follows that in those periods when major U.S. policy innovations have actually been determined, long-run success at acceptable cost, if attainable at all, has been perceived to depend either on U.S. military measures that involved high domestic risks—unless they were sure to be quickly successful, which could not be guaranteed and which Presidents tend to doubt—or upon political



strategies in Vietnam that posed the equally high domestic political risks of short-run instability and failure in Vietnam.

The standard resolution at such moments has been simply to turn away from long-run aims and the measures associated with them, to concentrate almost exclusively upon the aim of minimizing the short-run risk of non-Communist collapse or Communist take-overs. To this end the policy relies heavily on means that do not raise domestic apprehension and opposition, but it also includes those types of instruments "restricted" under Rule 2—their acceptability roughly in the order listed below—judged by the President minimally necessary to this short-run aim.

Rule 2 (extended): *Do not, unless needed to satisfy Rule 1:*

1. Bomb North Vietnam;
2. Commit U.S. combat troops to Vietnam;
3. Commit U.S. combat troops to Laos or Cambodia;
4. Mobilize reserves;
5. Destroy major cities in North Vietnam;
6. Institute wartime domestic controls;
7. Take major risks of war with Soviet China or Communist China;
8. Invade North Vietnam;
9. Use nuclear weapons.

Strong political inhibitions against initiating such "restricted" measures are revealed by the prolonged unwillingness of any administration to introduce any of them until needed to sustain Rule 1: i.e., to prevent defeat in Vietnam before the next election. The President himself must be persuaded that they are essential for that purpose; this is usually long after their use has been urged by others. Indeed, most of these measures have never yet been used. Although most of them have been considered or recommended at various times, often on the more-or-less plausible grounds that they were essential, or highly important, to achieving real "success," Presidents have not, in fact, been willing to adopt any one of them unless and until it was judged essential to avoiding short-run defeat: i.e. to restore a stalemate.

A general presidential tendency to preserve flexibility, or to focus on or value only short-run consequences, or to economize on means, could not explain the strength and specificity of these inhibitions. Nor have Presidents been strictly indifferent to lon-

ger-run prospects, or to the possibility of "victory." The chosen policy usually employs far more in the way of "nonrestricted" instruments than is needed merely to avoid defeat. These include: non-U.S. ground forces; commitments and assurances to allies, warnings to opponents; clandestine activities; economic and military aid; advisers; combat, logistic, mobility, and air support (even to allied invasion forces).

Moreover, once a "restricted item" is first used to avoid defeat, its use may be greatly expanded in pursuit of ultimate "success": thus, Johnson's use of U.S. ground troops in South Vietnam and bombing of "military targets" in North Vietnam and Laos, after they had been introduced in 1965 to avoid imminent defeat. Yet even in the optimistic mood of 1967 and despite the urgings of his military commanders that new means could bring a "win," Johnson resisted going further down the list — e.g., to drop all White House controls on the target list in North Vietnam, or to invade Laos or Cambodia, or mobilize reserves — in the absence of an urgent need to avert failure.

After March, 1968, de-escalation was subject to limits similar to those earlier for escalation; again, choices had the desired effect of avoiding short-run collapse, in this case, on the U.S. domestic front: in other words, once more "buying time" rather than winning or losing; buying stalemate; prolonging the war.

Many of the paradoxical features of U.S. escalating decisions as seen from the inside — the "discrepancies" noted earlier between chosen policies, on the one hand, and internal predictions, recommendations and long-run aims on the other — can thus be seen to reflect conflict between domestic political requirements on outcomes and domestic political constraints on means.

A peculiar effect of a strong domestic political ingredient in policymaking is greatly to enhance the salience and importance of short-run considerations. There are always a legislative program and presidential appointments to get through Congress this year, and Congressional elections no later than next year, even when a presidential election is not close at hand.

It so happens that in Vietnam policy alternatives have not allowed a subtle adjustment of long-term and short-term considerations, which appear in sharp conflict. The President is challenged, in effect, to pursue one or the other. Thus, the long-run

aim of a self-sufficient and relatively democratic South Vietnam not entirely dominated by Communists seems to demand an approach — e.g., a regime based on Southern, civilian, nationalist, and non-Catholic religious leadership, drawing peasant and union support — that poses relatively high risks in the short run of governmental collapse or of “accommodation” to Communists. To decide that short-run interests are very important is to bias policy almost entirely toward a short-run orientation: away from such approaches as that above, whatever their long-run merits, toward policies whose only advantages lie in their higher degree of U.S. control and security against short-run “disaster.”

Thus, among the consequences of applying Rules 1 and 2 to policy choices, as officials have perceived the alternatives in Vietnam, are several of the patterns observed earlier:

1. Chosen policies appear from the inside as oriented almost exclusively to short-run considerations; evidently ignoring or trading off very large differences in predicted long-run costs, risks, benefits, and probability of success in pursuit of small reductions in the short-run risk (tacitly, of “losing” South Vietnam prior to the next election).

2. Chosen programs are predicted internally to be inadequate — or at best “long shots” — either to “win” or even to avert defeat in the long run (in contrast to public statements, and to some recommended policies that pose higher short-run domestic risks).

3. Actual policies emphasize predominantly military — rather than political — means, aims, considerations, and executive responsibility, on both the Vietnamese and American sides, for reasons of short-run security.

4. The U.S. supports — intervening as necessary to instate or maintain — a narrow-based, right-wing, anti-Communist, “pro-American,” authoritarian (since 1963, essentially military) regime in Saigon, with heavy Northern and Catholic influence: despite its inability to win wider support for long-run self-sufficiency.

All of these features combine to give American policy its peculiar appearance, seen from inside, of being dedicated to preserving a stalemate, at ever-increasing levels of violence.

Moreover, at least three other characteristics of U.S. government performance, not discussed earlier, correspond to the im-



plications of this decision model: lack of "leverage," lying, and self-deception. Let us examine these in turn.

The notable weakness of U.S. influence on the policies, either political or military, of its principal ally — first the French and then the GVN — despite near-total dependence of the ally on U.S. support to pursue the war, follows directly from the U.S. political imperatives.

Rules 1 and 2 together led us, from 1950 to 1965, to accept the role continuously of adviser and supporter to another government carrying the responsibility for administration and fighting — even when our limited role seemed to risk imminent defeat of the non-Communist efforts. From time to time in those fifteen years, administration leaders would point out publicly of the ally we were supporting: "It is, after all, *their* fight." But these officials' private perceptions would have been better expressed: "In view of our strategic (and domestic political) interests, it is *our* fight, all right, but they have got to fight it for us; because if they don't, we might have to, and that would be nearly as bad as losing."

Given the domestic political constraints embodied in Rule 1, U.S. leaders saw the avoidance of Communist take-over of all of Vietnam as of very considerable importance, both internationally and domestically. Yet for the same reasons as reflected in Rule 2, they had to hope urgently they could induce others to do the fighting, and take the responsibility for the failures and the casualties, leaving us only with the burden of dollars, material, and advice.

This "bargain" — first with the French, then with the GVN — has always seemed in danger of breaking down, facing the current administration with the loss of South Vietnam or with a necessity to take over the combat ourselves. Hence, our officials rarely felt they could afford to strain the bargain by "pressuring" our ally into fighting better or differently, or into taking political measures to which it was, in fact, adamantly opposed, even when we suspected that such changes were critical to success. In effect the U.S. had no leverage to use, despite the intelligence perception that the military-political challenge of the Communist-led forces would almost surely grow, and the ability of the ally (French, then the GVN/RVNAF) to meet it would decline, unless these changes did occur.

Meanwhile, as an essential part of the bargain with our ally —

serving to keep it in power, fighting — high U.S. officials provided verbal and symbolic encouragement and evidence of U.S. concern and commitment. This came “cheap” in terms of current demands on the U.S. public. But it was making ever more certain the provision of U.S. combat forces if that became essential to holding Vietnam.

To convince the GVN (and its Vietnamese critics and rivals) — in lieu of sending U.S. troops immediately — that we would do “whatever necessary” to support them, the administration had to say so publicly, and to assert that major U.S. interests were at stake; likewise, to warn Hanoi’s leaders and deter them from pressure.

On the other hand, to get sizeable enough sums of money out of Congress, these officials had to say, again, that major U.S. interests were at stake, implying that even major commitments would be justified; but at the same time suggest that there was very little likelihood that these programs would lead to U.S. combat involvement. The only way in which these requirements could be harmonized was to profess, at any given time, great optimism for the results of the GVN’s performance if the U.S. aid were sent (combined with pessimism, and the prospects of major losses for the U.S., if it were not).

Here, then, is the explanation for the news-management recounted earlier. Deceptive games with Congress and public are played for serious stakes. The President’s resolution of the conflicting demands and constraints upon him called for suppressing any indications of possible inadequacy of the programs he proposed. The penalty for frankness could be to ally against his programs those who might conclude these were not worth attempting at all, and those who would condemn him for not doing much more. Yet the latter could be expected to oppose him if he did ask and do much more, unless he won quickly, which he did not expect; and the former would desert him if he took their advice, and lost Vietnam. Honesty, it appeared, would only earn him opposition whatever he did, and sooner than otherwise.

But in this case, internal analyses, estimates, reports, planning, recommendations, all indicated that in a whole variety of ways these programs were inadequate. Thus all these documents and opinions had to be concealed, by secrecy and deception.

In short, the public is lied to: about what the President's decision is, what advice he rejects, what he was told to expect, what he foresees and intends for the future.

When he decides to go slow and small, as in November 1961, the fact that much more was considered and recommended is suppressed lest doubts be raised on the meaningfulness of the program. James Reston's remark at the outset of the Taylor mission that Taylor was not a man who would "blithely" recommend committing U.S. combat units to a jungle war was presumably right; likewise Taylor's own comment that "any American" would be reluctant to do so "unless absolutely necessary." Nevertheless, that is what Taylor did recommend. The fact that he did so, therefore, carried an important message about the seriousness of the situation, and the prospects of the lesser course the President chose. To suppress the fact of this recommendation, as the President chose to do, was to conceal this information. And for officials to lie to reporters about Taylor's views — which were shared by Rostow and the JCS, and initially at least by McNamara and Gilpatric — was to convey the opposite, untrue impression.<sup>47</sup>

By the same token, when a President finally decided to go in big, the schedule and total commitment were concealed, with increments — actually programmed in advance — being announced as if based on a sequence of *ad hoc* decisions on "small steps," lest public fears be aroused on the costs of the program, and the ultimate risks and commitment. This was the nature of the "public information" program associated with the early bombing campaign against North Vietnam, the build-up of troop levels to 75,000 in the spring of 1965, and the open-ended build-up of troops to 175,000 and beyond, determined in July 1965 (the latter after

<sup>47</sup> To my knowledge, no other paper challenged the *Times*, or the administration, on these versions of Taylor's advice. Nor did any different version appear until the appearance in 1965 of the Schlesinger and Sorensen histories, neither of which drew attention to the fact that they directly contradicted all newspaper stories of the time and subsequent accounts. See, for example, the comments in Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (rev. ed.; New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 153, 154; or in David Halberstam, *op. cit.*, p. 67: "Above all else, Taylor wanted to keep American combat troops out of the Vietnamese jungles."

So much for the belief, widely held in some circles and encouraged by the government, that "everything comes out in the *New York Times*. . . . There are no real secrets," and that the *Times* is an adequate basis for understanding an ongoing or past decision-making process within the Executive Branch.



an announcement of mobilization had been tentatively decided on and drafted — by me, for one — then abandoned).

One pertinent effect of this information policy was that it considerably distorted the public view, then and later, of what the President thought he was getting us into, what he thought of the chances and the relevant goals, and just what was in the inner pages of the contracts Congress and the public were being asked, implicitly, to sign.

From such a mistaken understanding of this and the other choices, bad predictions and prescriptions must follow. It leads to wrong questions and wrong inferences about presidential motives, and about what changes in his calculations and in the pressures on him might influence his choices. It could lead, for example, to the inference that “the only thing we have to fear is (presidential) hope”: when, in truth, unrealistic presidential hopes were not a prominent factor in any major decisions to press onward.

Thus those who keep secret the past condemn us to repeat it.

#### *Escalation, Phase B: The Quagmire Machine*

Both of the deceptive practices noted above bear on the question: Why is the quagmire model, flawed as it is, so plausible to the public eye?

Part of the answer is that Presidents choose to foster to a misleading degree impressions that their Vietnam decision-making is subject to a “quicksand process.” They do this despite a number of unfavorable implications: “inadvertence”; ignorance; inattention; lack of Presidential control; lack of realistic planning; lack of expertise; over-ambitious aims for means used; over-optimistic expectations. They choose to encourage, ultimately, these particular criticisms because either a different substantive policy or a more accurate public understanding of their actual policy seems to them to pose even greater disadvantages and risks.

All very calculated, this. But, it turns out, this posture of secrecy and deception toward Congress and the public, maintained over time, takes its internal toll. Ironically, one price is that all of the above imputed flaws and limitations increasingly do characterize the executive decision-making process. And for a number

of reasons, as the chosen policy begins to be implemented, internal operational reporting, program analyses, and high-level expectations do gradually drift in the direction of the public optimism expressed constantly from the outset.

Thus real hopes — ill-founded hopes — follow hard upon the crisis choices, eventually replacing phony and invalid optimism with genuine invalid optimism.

Again, the aftermath of the November 1961 decision is typical. Schlesinger reports it well: the striking move to optimism in official expectations in 1962, a reversal which the public misread as vindication of earlier estimates.<sup>48</sup> U.S. combat troops, it was now appearing, had not been “essential” after all. (If the President had, indeed, suspected that earlier, he was the only one who seemed vindicated.) But no recriminations blossomed in this atmosphere; only mutual congratulations that the long shot was paying off.

Roger Hilsman reports a meeting in Honolulu in April, 1963, at which,

General Harkins gave us all the facts and figures — the number of strategic hamlets established, number of Viet Cong killed, operations initiated by government forces, and so on. He could not, of course, he said, give any guarantees, but he thought he could say that *by Christmas it would be all over*. The Secretary of Defense was elated. He reminded me that I had attended one of the very first of these meetings, *when it had all looked so black — and that had been only a year and a half ago*.<sup>49</sup>

Why the fast turn-around? For several reasons, none peculiar to this case. First, the new programs had been accompanied by new officials directed to carry them to success. Ignorant of past estimates and current realities in Vietnam, they had no strong reason to assume that the tasks they had been given were infeasible with the means at hand. And they quickly learned that Washington tended to rely on reporting up through the chain of operational command; which is to say, their performance in their jobs would be evaluated by their own reports of “progress” in

<sup>48</sup> See Schlesinger, *A Thousand Days*, *op. cit.*, p. 508, and *The Bitter Heritage*, *op. cit.*, pp. 41, 42.

<sup>49</sup> Hilsman, *op. cit.*, pp. 466, 467; italics added.

their respective fields. As an American division commander told one of his district advisers, who insisted on reporting the persistent presence of unpacified VC hamlets in his area: "Son, you're writing our own report card in this country. Why are you failing us?"

Even when this did not lead to conscious dishonesty at the higher levels in Saigon, it created a bias toward accepting and reporting favorable information from subordinates and Vietnamese "counterparts," neither of whom failed to notice.

Thus, it was more mechanism than coincidence that in 1962 and early 1963,

the strategy of unconditional support of Diem combined with the military adviser system seemed to be working — or so at least the senior American officials in Saigon assured the President.<sup>50</sup>

Such assurances said nothing more nor less than that the two officials themselves were "working" — succeeding — in the precise two programs they had been sent by Kennedy respectively to manage.

Ngo Dinh Nhu made the strategic hamlet program his personal project and published glowing reports of spectacular success. One might have wondered whether Nhu was just the man to mobilize the idealism of the villages; but Ambassador Nolting and General Harkins listened uncritically to his claims and passed them back to Washington as facts, where they were read with elation.<sup>51</sup>

One might also have wondered — but no one ever seemed to — whether Nhu was just the man uniquely to report upon "his personal project"; or whether Nolting was just the man to report the effects and value of reassuring Diem and Nhu, or Harkins the success of the military adviser system, their own respective personal projects.

But to emphasize exclusively subordinate bureaucratic influences in this process of internal self-deception would be greatly to underrate the impact of the President himself, and of his high-level appointees. They, too, like Nolting, Harkins, or Nhu, had their "personal projects," larger ones, on which they reported to

<sup>50</sup> Schlesinger, *The Bitter Heritage*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*



those who controlled their budgets and their tenure: Congress and the public. And they too, thanks to the security system and executive privilege, "wrote their own report cards": with a little help from their subordinates.

Precisely as at lower levels, but with enormously broader impact, the needs of the President and the Secretaries of State and Defense to use "information" to reassure Congress and the public had its effect on the internal flow of information up to the President. Reports and analyses that supported the administration's public position and could be released or leaked to that end were "helpful" and welcome, while "pessimism" was at best painful, less "useful," if not even dangerous to have down on paper. Executive values like these (vastly sharpened in 1966-1968, when skeptics and critics were louder and had to be refuted) translate into powerful incentives at lower levels to give the Chief what he so obviously wants.

Thus — granted human wishfulness, as well, as a factor at all levels — pessimism regarding an ongoing policy is a fragile, unstable phenomenon within the government. Ironically, even the VC and the GVN (earlier, the Viet Minh and French) played their role, too, in providing indicators of allied "progress" and intervals when things "seemed to be working." In 1951, 1956, 1962, and 1965, bureaucratic pressures toward optimism were catalyzed by actual effects of the new programs on allies and opponents in the desired direction. But "in the field" these effects proved very temporary, whereas our reading of them did not. As Kennedy had predicted, the effects of a "small drink" on friend and opponent faded quickly. What he may not fully have foreseen was the far more lasting afterglow in our own system.

In each case, the aftermath of escalation was an increased emphasis on military factors, and an accompanying alteration of mood from pessimism to great optimism. Thus, when U.S. combat units flooded into Vietnam from 1965 on, the pessimism of later 1964 gave way increasingly to buoyant hopes, by 1967, of an essentially military victory. But this had had its counterpart as early as 1951, after U.S. materiel and American liaison teams had made their way to Tonkin to join a failing French effort.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>52</sup> See Senator John F. Kennedy's speech in 1951, cited in Schlesinger, *The Bitter*

Meanwhile, the Viet Minh, and later the VC, had a characteristic response to a new U.S./GVN strategy or a scaling-up of our involvement that further encouraged our switch to unbounded optimism. After suffering initial setbacks, it has been their practice to lie low for an extended period, gather data, analyze experience, develop and test new adapted strategies, then plan and prepare carefully before launching them. (Nothing, our Vietnam experience tells us, could be more un-American.)

Since so great a part of U.S. and GVN knowledge of enemy activities comes from operational contacts, there seems to be an irresistible tendency for U.S. operators to believe that data concerning contacts reveals enemy capabilities, i.e., that lessened VC combat operations indicate lessened capability. Another mechanism, then: U.S. optimism grows during VC "inactivity" — periods when VC activities are of a sort we do not observe — reaching a peak, ironically, when extreme VC quiescence is due to intense preparations for an explosion.

Crisis periods, then, are typically preceded by high points in U.S. official expectations. Thus, peaks of U.S. optimism occurred in late 1953 (just before Dienbienphu), 1958 (when guerrilla warfare was about to recommence), early 1963 (the VC had been studying the vulnerabilities of the strategic hamlet program, and meanwhile infiltrating massively), and late 1967 (during last-minute recruiting and preparations for the Tet offensive, including feints at the borders).

If a fever chart of U.S. expectations — say, anticipations of success — could be drawn meaningfully for the last twenty years, it would have a recurrent saw-tooth shape: an accelerating rise of optimism just before an abrupt decline (Figure 1 is a conceptual sketch of such a graph). Our perceptual and emotional experience in Vietnam can be regarded as a sequence of two-phase cycles, in which Phase B — optimism — evolves causally in large part from decisions that follow Phase A, a crisis period of pessimism.

(The B-phases in Figure 1 have been drawn with a reverse S-shape, signifying three subphases: an initial period in which the

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*Heritage, op. cit.*, p. 27, on official optimism underlying a Truman-Eisenhower "credibility gap" in Indochina.

VC suffer real reverses and the GVN stabilizes on the basis of new programs; then a period in which, in reality, the VC have adapted and the GVN is declining, but U.S. expectations remain at a plateau rather than being reduced; finally, the VC begin quietly preparing for a major offensive, causing U.S. hopes to soar.)

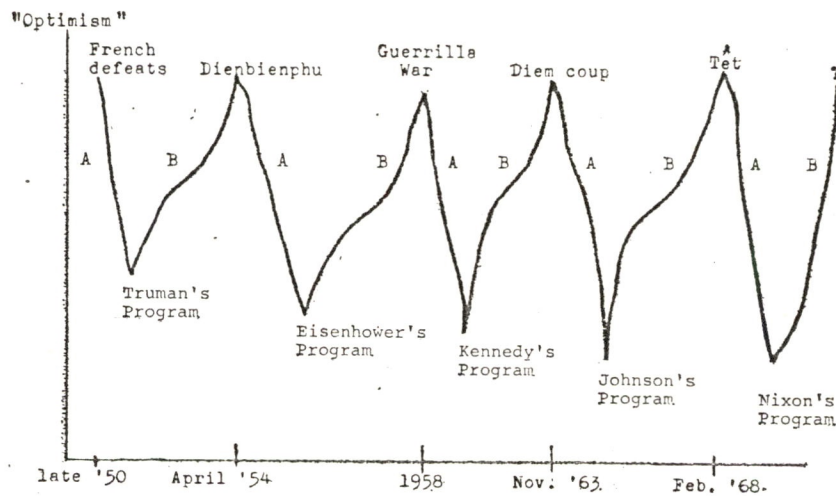


FIGURE I

If major escalating decisions qualitatively increasing our involvement had actually been made during Phase B's, that would be the quagmire model. It has never been the case.

However, during the B-phases, although no new major policies or commitments are introduced, U.S. aims may change significantly in the atmosphere of optimism, especially in the last stage, going beyond the avoidance of defeat — dominant aim in Phase A and the early Phase B stage — to achieving a victory. At the same time, real optimism leads officials to be much less cautious in public aims and predictions; to give commanders more leeway; to monitor operations less closely; and to indulge in operations that are costly (in many terms) and of low effectiveness but may speed the coming win. All of these responses lead to toleration of rapidly rising costs, and hence to a feeling, when a new crisis brings the return of Phase A, that the stakes, the investment, the commit-



ment have become still higher than before, the need to avoid "defeat" being now even greater.

Nevertheless, this post-escalation euphoria, or "quagmire phase" of the cycle seems to play no essential role in the escalation process. It simply reinforces the presidential tendency to escalate if and as necessary to avoid a short-run "defeat" or "loss of all Vietnam to Communists." As Leslie Gelb has put it: "Each administration was prepared to pay the costs it could foresee for itself." Political, along with strategic, motives underlying that tendency were already strong enough in 1950 to induce the initial U.S. commitment without any prior or current period of American optimism. And they almost surely were felt strongly enough in subsequent years to have induced much greater escalation than occurred if that had appeared both necessary and effective in the short run.

Consciously oriented as escalating decisions actually were, when chosen, to the defensive aim of averting short-run Communist take-over, *each of these decisions of the past two decades can be said to have achieved its initial, internal aim.*

In Gelb's phrase: "The system worked." In fact, these presidential policies and tactics, in sequence, had the effect of holding South Vietnam out of Communist hands "cheaply" — i.e., without sizeable numbers of U.S. combat troops — for fifteen years, from 1950 to 1965.

Whether efforts and sacrifices, by Americans and Vietnamese, of even these limited but increasing magnitudes could easily have been justified to various parts of the electorate in terms of such limited aims — in starkest terms, the restoration of stalemate, and the postponement of a possible Communist take-over in Vietnam beyond the date of the next U.S. election — is another question. No administration chose to find out. To publicize more idealistic or strategically decisive goals, as they all did, was to forego credit for meeting successfully the limited short-run objectives that each — it is inferred here — privately accepted. More seriously, it was to incur the likelihood of suffering an appearance of recurrent failure of programs to meet their announced aims, and failure of administration predictions or "hopes" to be confirmed. But these impressions of failure, however embarrassing politically, each administration since 1950 has preferred either to the risks of candor

on its private aims and expectations or to the risks of accepting the "loss of Vietnam" during or soon after its term in office.

In these respects, too, the policies "worked." Until 1968, at least, each President avoided the kinds of political costs related to Vietnam that his tactics were meant mainly to avert. In fact, up to the present, no President has had to face a political penalty for losing South Vietnam. Not even LBJ will be blamed in history for that, although he is blamed for other things.

Yet the earlier "cheap victories," year by year from 1950 to 1965, were purchased at a long-term price, one not yet paid in full. Presidential policies and tactics actively sustained and encouraged over that period a high estimate of U.S. strategic stakes in the conflict within the U.S. executive branch and the military, the Congress, and the public. Meanwhile they failed — as was highly likely, in the light of earlier internal estimates — either to strengthen adequately non-Communist Vietnamese efforts; to modify Communist aims; to deter or prevent an increase in Communist capabilities; or, of course, to induce the acceptance by Hanoi's leaders or revolutionary forces in South Vietnam of the U.S. role, presence, or aims in South Vietnam, or of the U.S.-supported Saigon regime.

Thus these presidential policies and tactics locked together with these other factors to produce, from the perspective of most of that fifteen-year period, *a high probability that U.S. troops would end up fighting in South Vietnam, and U.S. planes bombing throughout Indochina: i.e., high probabilities that they would be sent if necessary; and that they would be necessary.*

This is the future that three U.S. Presidents failed to resist: indeed, knowingly cooperated with and prepared. Not, of course, that any President liked, wanted, or hoped for the darker developments that actually emerged — the deaths, the costs, the disruptions — only that they preferred the risk of these, and later the certainty, to certain other prospects they saw as alternatives. Thus the first three Presidents determined the reality of large-scale war that the next two accepted and sustained. That is a generation of Presidents: all the Presidents within the lifetime of a recent college graduate.

Will the tradition end with the current President? How many more could it encompass? Nothing in the generalizations we

have abstracted in this paper from experience of the last two decades gives a clear hint of a definite breaking-point, or a foreseeable change in basic motives and values either for the Communist-led forces or the U.S. government. On its face, that is simply a limitation of the analysis, a characteristic — perhaps a defect — of the model suggested.

Or perhaps it is a property of reality.

If so, it is a human and political reality, and humans can, in principle, change it. But change would not be easy. Rule 1 has deep roots in politicians' fears and motives, and in public responses, that have been powerfully influential for twenty years, through some hard times and challenges. There is little indication yet that it will not speak commandingly to Presidents after this one. (Of its authority for the present one, there can be no real doubt.)<sup>53</sup>

Improved Presidential foresight — even the awareness that might be attained from this analysis — would not probably supersede Rule 1. If anything, it might serve to relax the constraining influence of Rule 2.

In the spring of 1965 President Johnson is reported to have received calls almost daily from one of his closest advisors telling him (what no one had to tell him): "Lyndon, don't be the first American President to lose a war."

It is true that such advisers omitted warnings of other deadly errors. They neglected to caution him: "Don't, over more than one or two years, lie to the public; or mislead and bypass Congress; or draft and spend and kill and suffer casualties at the rate your military will propose; or abort negotiations; or, even once,

<sup>53</sup> The discussion has gone only through 1968; no attempt is made here to apply the conjectures and generalizations of this paper to the statements and actions of the current administration. That is left as an exercise to the reader.

Nothing in the past attitudes and history of the current President, or any of his public statements or official actions so far in office, suggests in any way that these generalizations should be less applicable to him than to any of his predecessors; thus this extrapolation should be a fair test. One might, for example, address the question: Which year between now and 1977 might Richard Milhous Nixon consider an acceptable one, for him, to lose South Vietnam to Communist control?

For my own views, see my article, "Murder in Laos: The Reason Why," *New York Review of Books* (March 11, 1971), 13-17: "Like Kennedy and Johnson before him, Richard Nixon believes he cannot hold the White House for a second term unless he holds Saigon through his first."



allow your generals to describe the enemy as defeated on the eve of their major offensive.”<sup>54</sup>

But if they had, and if he had seen the cogency of their warning: Would he then have decided to lose the war? Or would he, mindful of the time constraints, have acted to win it within them?

The same question applies to earlier presidents; and later.

### *The Faces of the Quagmire*

Why is the quagmire model so often pressed? And why is it so widely accepted?

Looking at where their policies and tactics have brought us so far, it is easy to understand why the past four Presidents would want, before and after, to conceal and deprecate their own foreknowledge and intentions.<sup>55</sup> And it is no harder to guess why — perhaps unconsciously — participant-observers of one of these administrations or another have promoted the same interpretation of foresight and purpose, values and priorities, influence and responsibility, respecting their past colleagues within and outside government. Indeed, they make no secret of the conclusion they wish to convey by the quagmire metaphor and model concerning the responsibility of individuals and groups.

Thus, Townsend Hoopes, acutely and perceptively critical of the policies under Johnson and earlier Presidents, extends what Richard Falk has called “the circle of responsibility” widely indeed, in explicit purpose to relieve the burden of those seemingly at its center. Traumatized by a lunch with two reporters from the *Village Voice* who suggested that he himself, as Assistant Secretary of the Air Force under Johnson, might have been guilty of war crimes (their subsequent article was titled: “The War Criminals

<sup>54</sup> No advisor is perfect. There are things Presidents have to learn for themselves. One supposes no one told President Nixon, before the event: “Don’t condone the shooting of white students by National Guardsmen just after crossing a national border with troops without consulting Congress, the public, or the country invaded.”

<sup>55</sup> No event, and no presidential decision, of course, occurred because it “had” to, in any sense of certainty or absolute determinism. What does? On the other hand, in every major case, from the perspective of existing, inside knowledge and opinion years earlier, what actually occurred in the way of presidential decision and of resulting developments in Vietnam would have seemed the way to bet.

Hedge Their Bets"), Hoopes has published several rejoinders and discussions of the problem of responsibility. In the first of these, after describing his chief concern in the disturbing luncheon conversation as having been "The broad question of how the *entire nation* had stumbled down the long slippery slope of self-delusion into the engulfing morass," Hoopes concludes:

The tragic story of Vietnam is not, in truth, a tale of malevolent men bent upon conquest for personal gain or imperial glory. It is the story of an entire generation of leaders (and an entire generation of followers). . . . [Johnson's] principal advisers were, almost uniformly, those considered when they took office to be among the ablest, the best, the most humane and liberal men that could be found for public trust. No one doubted their honest, high-minded pursuit of the best interests of their country, and indeed of the whole non-communist world, as they perceived those interests.<sup>56</sup>

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., less generous in his appreciation of some civilian Johnson lieutenants, is no less reluctant to single them or their Chief out as "guilty" in any special way for their role in our vast national undertaking. In the "quagmire" (literally, "morass") passage so often cited in this paper, he asserts:

It is not only idle but unfair to seek out guilty men. . . . we find ourselves entrapped today in . . . a war which no President, including President Johnson, desired or intended. The Vietnam story is a *tragedy without villains*. No thoughtful American can withhold sympathy as President Johnson ponders the gloomy choices which lie ahead.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Townsend Hoopes, "The Nuremberg Suggestion," *Washington Monthly* (December 1969), italics added; reprinted, with reply, in "The Hoopes Defense," by Judith Coburn and Geoffrey Cowan (authors of the original article referred to above, *Village Voice*, December 4, 1969), *Village Voice* (January 29, 1970). See also the cogent comment by lawyer Peter Weiss (with reply by Hoopes), *Washington Monthly* (June 1970), 4-8.

In none of his comments (nor in his later *Foreign Affairs* article<sup>1</sup>, "Legacy of the Cold War in Indochina," July 1970) does Hoopes dissent from this earlier general evaluation of the aims and values of the Johnson advisors, although it would seem fair to re-examine these on the basis of their official performance as it becomes increasingly known; and on their sense of social responsibility for events, shown after leaving office.

<sup>57</sup> Schlesinger, *The Bitter Heritage*, *op. cit.*, pp. 47, 48; italics added. Schlesinger's more recent comments, quoted earlier—"At every stage of our descent into the

One can read some of these passages as reflections of the sentiment Hoopes expresses: "What the country needs is not retribution, but therapy. . . ." (It is just possible that both are needed, at this point, in the interests of our country and of others.) He completes the sentence, plausibly, "therapy in the form of deeper understanding of our problems and of each other"; but in all of these passages and the larger arguments in which they are embedded, one senses that the drive for sympathetic therapy is setting back the cause of understanding.

Both the substance of the tentative conclusions in this paper, and my experience of the heuristic process that gradually pointed toward them, warn that a deeper analytical understanding of these well-guarded data and controverted events will not be likely to be reached by a searcher committed and determined to see the conflict and our part in it as "a tragedy without villains": war crimes without criminals, lies without liars, a process of immaculate deception.

The urge in these former officials to defend American institutions and legitimate authority (and surely some former administration leaders and colleagues, if not themselves) from the most extreme charges and sanctions ("Lyndon Johnson, though disturbingly volatile," Hoopes remarks, "was not in his worst moments an evil man in the Hitlerian sense") leads them as analysts to espouse and promulgate a view of process, roles, and motives that is grossly mistaken — as should be known to them from their own experience and access to information as officials.

Thus, an effort to defend against perceptions or charges of "immorality," in alleged pursuit of "objective judgment," leads in this case to historical and analytical error. And it has political consequences: It underwrites deceptions that have served importantly a succession of Presidents to maintain support for their substantive policies of intervention in Vietnam.

Of course, to promulgate a view is not necessarily to have it accepted. But this one has a powerful appeal. Earlier we asked, "Why is the quicksand model accepted by so many?" and offered

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quagmire, the military have played the dominant role. . . . At each point along the ghastly way, the generals promised . . . —do, of course, add villains to the tragedy, although not civilian ones. If he no longer thinks it idle to seek out guilty men, he has nevertheless managed to be unfair.



some cognitive answers. But we can suspect that an image speaks to deeper, more emotional concerns when it is presented regularly in the broad strokes of political cartoons in mass-circulation newspapers. That is what happened on the nation's editorial pages during the Cambodian invasion.

That week, while photographs on the front page showed unwonted images of *blitzkrieg*—tanks in formation driving across fields trailing plumes of dust, and locust swarms of American armed helicopters moving across new borders—and while reporters offered verbal pictures of the Cambodian village of Snoul being destroyed and looted, the drawings on the editorial pages were of Uncle Sams and GI Joes engulfed, bemused, floundering from a swamp marked "Vietnam" to one marked "Cambodia." Images, curiously, of impotence, passivity: ironically contrasting both with the news and the photographs of what Americans in southeast Asia were actually doing and with the President's announced intent to expunge notions of America as a "pitiful, helpless giant."

One cartoon, reproduced in *Time*, left the quagmire symbol to show the "U.S. citizen" in tatters on a raft, confronting three enormous, wide-mouthed whales, labelled: "Vietnam," "Cambodia," and "Laos."

Whales?

The imagery, pressed too far, reveals its key. The scale, and the menace, have simply been reversed. The actual role of America and Americans in and toward Indochina is distorted, to a staggering degree, in the very process of suggesting that it be reconsidered.

Looking back to the quicksand cartoons, one sees their self-pity, their preoccupation with Uncle Sam's predicament, and one finally asks: Where are the Asians? Where are the Cambodians, the Lao, the Vietnamese in these drawings?

Presumably—there is no other sign—they are the particles of the bog, bits of the porridgey quagmire that has seized GI Joe and will not free him. . . .

It is not, after all, only Presidents and Cabinet members who have a powerful need and reason to deny their responsibility for this war. And who succeed at it. Just as Presidents and their partisans find comfort and political safety in the quicksand image

of the *President-as-victim*, so Americans at large are reassured in sudden moments of doubt by the same image drawn large, *America-as-victim*. It is no more real than the first, and neither national understanding nor extrication truly lie that way.

To understand the process as it emerges in the documents behind public statements, the concerns never written that moved decisions, the history scratched on the minds of bureaucrats: to translate that understanding into images that can guide actions close-related to reality, one must begin by seeing that it is Americans, our leaders and ourselves, that build the bog, a trap much more for other victims: *our* policies, our politics the quagmire in which Indochina drowns.